BLIND LOVE

BY

WILKIE COLLINS

WITH A PREFACE BY WALTER BESANT AND

ILLUSTRATIONS BY A. FORESTIER

IN THREE VOLUMES

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PREFACE

IN the month of August, and in the middle of the seaside holiday, a message came to me from Wilkie Collins, then, though we hoped otherwise, on his death-bed.

It was conveyed to me by Mr. A. P. Watt. The words of his letter were as follows: 'I have just come from Wilkie Collins, who is very ill. He told me that his novel, "Blind Love," is unfinished, and that it is quite impossible for him to think of finishing it. Then he said: "Ask Walter Besant if he will finish it for me. Tell him that I would do as much for him if he were in my place and I in his. If he has the time I think he will do this for me. We are both old hands at the work, and

we understand it." He has placed in my hands the notes of the remainder, which I will forward to you if you can accede to his request.

Under the circumstances of the case, it was impossible to decline this request. I wrote to say that time should be made, and the notes were forwarded to me at Robin Hood's Bay. I began by reading carefully and twice over, so as to get a grip of the story and the novelist's intention, the part that had already appeared in the 'Illustrated London News,' and the proofs so far as the author had gone. I then turned to the notes. I found that these were not merely notes, such as I had expected—simple indications of the plot and the development of events—but an actual detailed scenario, in which every incident, however trivial, was carefully laid down: there were also fragments of dialogue inserted at those places where dialogue was wanted to emphasise the situation and make it real. I was much struck with the writer's perception of the

vast importance of dialogue in making the reader seize the scene. Description requires attention: dialogue rivets attention.

It is not an easy task, nor is it pleasant, to carry on another man's work: but the possession of this scenario lightened the work enormously. I have been careful to adhere faithfully and exactly to the plot, scene by scene, down to the smallest detail as it was laid down by the author in this book. I have altered nothing. I have preserved and incorporated every fragment of dialogue. I have used the very language wherever that was written so carefully as to show that it was meant to be used. I think that there is only one trivial detail where I had to choose, because it was not clear from the notes what the author had intended. The plot of the novel, every scene, every situation, from beginning to end, is the work of Wilkie Collins. The actual writing is entirely his up to a certain point: from that point to the end it is his in

fragments, but mainly mine. Where his writing ends and mine begins, I need not point out. The practised critic will, no doubt, at once lay his finger on the spot.

I have therefore carried out the author's wishes to the best of my ability. Would that he were living still, if only to regret that he had not been allowed to finish his last work with his own hand!

WALTER BESANT.

CONTENTS

OF

THE FIRST VOLUME

PAGE

PROLOGUE 1

THE STORY

FIRST PERIOD

CHAPTER

I. THE SOUR FRENCH WINE 97

II. THE MAN SHE REFUSED 109

III. THE REGISTERED PACKET 122

IV. THE GAME: MOUNTJOY LOSES 134

V. THE GAME: MOUNTJOY PLAYS A NEW CARD . . 150

VI. THE GAME: MOUNTJOY WINS 166

VII. DOCTORING THE DOCTOR 181

VIII. HER FATHER'S MESSAGE 198

IX. MR. VIMPANY ON INTOXICATION 212

X. THE MOCKERY OF DECEIT 225

CHAPTER PAGE

XI. MRS. VIMPANY'S FAREWELL 231

XII. LORD HARRY'S DEFENCE 247

SECOND PERIOD

XIII. IRIS AT HOME 260

XIV. THE LADY'S-MAID 278

XV. MR. HENLEY'S TEMPER 288

XVI. THE DOCTOR IN FULL DRESS 294

ILLUSTRATIONS

TO VOL. I

'DENNIS, I HAVE GOT SOMETHING FOR YOU TO DO. IT MUST BE KEPT A SECRET, AND IT ALLOWS OF NO DELAY' . . . . . *Frontispiece*

LIFTING THE PERFORATED PAPER, HE PLACED IT DELICATELY OVER THE PAGE WHICH CONTAINED THE UNINTELLIGIBLE WRITING. . . . *To face page* 13

MRS. LEWSON'S FACE BRIGHTENED IN AN INSTANT: SHE THREW THE DOOR WIDE OPEN WITH A GLAD CRY OF RECOGNITION 61

SHE DREW OUT A SILVER TRAVELLING-FLASK. ONE GLANCE AT THE NAME ENGRAVED ON IT TOLD HIM THE TERRIBLE TRUTH 95

IMPULSIVELY SHE DREW HIS HEAD DOWN 111

'NOW,' SHE SAID, TAKING A CHAIR BY THE BEDSIDE, 'YOU SHALL KNOW WHAT A CLEVER WIFE YOU HAVE GOT' . 197

THE WILD LORD READ IT: LOOKED (TO USE THE MESSENGER'S OWN WORDS) LIKE A MAN CUT TO THE HEART, AND SEEMED AT A LOSS WHAT TO SAY OR DO . . 265

BLIND LOVE

THE PROLOGUE

I

SOON after sunrise, on a cloudy morning in the year 1881, a special messenger disturbed the repose of Dennis Howmore, at his place of residence in the pleasant Irish town of Ardoon.

Well acquainted apparently with the way upstairs, the man thumped on a bedroom door, and shouted his message through it:

Giles had paid rent when he owed it; and, worse still, was disposed to remember in a friendly spirit what England had done for Ireland, in the course of the last fifty years. If anything appeared to justify distrust of the mysterious Object of which he was in search, Dennis resolved to be vigilantly on the look-out for a gun-barrel, whenever he passed a hedge on his return journey to the town.

Arrived at the milestone, he discovered on the ground behind it one Object only—a fragment of a broken tea-cup.

Naturally enough, Dennis hesitated. It seemed to be impossible that the earnest and careful instructions which he had received could relate to such a trifle as this. At the same time, he was acting under orders which were as positive as tone, manner, and language could make them. Passive obedience appeared to be the one safe course to take—at the risk of a reception, irritating to any man's

self-respect, when he returned to his employer with a broken tea-cup in his hand.

The event entirely failed to justify his misgivings. There could be no doubt that Sir Giles attached serious importance to the contemptible discovery made at the milestone. After having examined and re-examined the fragment, he announced his intention of sending the clerk on a second errand—still without troubling himself to explain what his incomprehensible instructions meant.

'If I am not mistaken,' he began, 'the Reading Rooms, in our town, open as early as nine. Very well. Go to the Rooms this morning, on the stroke of the clock.' He stopped, and consulted the letter which lay open on his bed. 'Ask the librarian,' he continued, 'for the third volume of Gibbon's "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire." Open the book at pages seventy-eight and seventy-nine. If you find a piece of paper

between those two leaves, take possession of it when nobody is looking at you, and bring it to me. That's all, Dennis. And bear in mind that I shall not recover the use of my patience till I see you again.'

On ordinary occasions, the head clerk was not a man accustomed to insist on what was due to his dignity. At the same time he was a sensible human being, conscious of the consideration to which his responsible place in the office entitled him. Sir Giles's irritating reserve, not even excused by a word of apology, reached the limits of his endurance. He respectfully protested.

'I regret to find, sir,' he said, 'that I have lost my place in my employer's estimation. The man to whom you confide the superintendence of your clerks and the transaction of your business has, I venture to think, some claim (under the present circumstances) to be trusted.'

The banker was now offended on his side.

'I readily admit your claim,' he answered, 'when you are sitting at your desk in my office. But, even in these days of strikes, co-operations, and bank holidays, an employer has one privilege left—he has not ceased to be a Man, and he has not forfeited a man's right to keep his own secrets. I fail to see anything in my conduct which has given you just reason to complain.'

Dennis, rebuked, made his bow in silence, and withdrew.

Did these acts of humility mean that he submitted? They meant exactly the contrary. He had made up his mind that Sir Giles Mountjoy's motives should, sooner or later, cease to be mysteries to Sir Giles Mountjoy's clerk.

II

CAREFULLY following his instructions, he consulted the third volume of Gibbon's great History, and found, between the seventy-eighth and seventy-ninth pages, something remarkable this time.

It was a sheet of delicately-made paper, pierced with a number of little holes, infinitely varied in size, and cut with the smoothest precision. Having secured this curious object, while the librarian's back was turned, Dennis Howmore reflected.

A page of paper, unintelligibly perforated for some purpose unknown, was in itself a suspicious thing. And what did suspicion suggest to the inquiring mind in South-

Western Ireland, before the suppression of the Land League? Unquestionably—Police!

On the way back to his employer, the banker's clerk paid a visit to an old friend—a journalist by profession; and a man of varied learning and experience as well. Invited to inspect the remarkable morsel of paper, and to discover the object with which the perforations had been made, the authority consulted proved to be worthy of the trust reposed in him. Dennis left the newspaper-office an enlightened man—with information at the disposal of Sir Giles, and with a sense of relief which expressed itself irreverently in these words: 'Now I have got him!'

The bewildered banker looked backwards and forwards from the paper to the clerk, and from the clerk to the paper. 'I don't understand it,' he said. 'Do you?'

Still preserving the appearance of humility, Dennis asked leave to venture on a guess.

been complied with when the discoveries were made at the back of the milestone, and between the pages of Gibbon's History. Sir Giles had already arrived at the conclusion that a conspiracy was in progress to assassinate him, and perhaps to rob the bank. The wiser head clerk pointed to the perforated paper and the incomprehensible writing received that morning. 'If we can find out what these mean,' he said, 'you may be better able, sir, to form a correct opinion.'

'And who is to do that?' the banker asked.

'I can but try, sir,' was the modest reply, 'if you see no objection to my making the attempt.'

Sir Giles approved of the proposed experiment, silently and satirically, by a bend of his head.

Too discreet a man to make a suspiciously

ready use of the information which he had privately obtained, Dennis took care that his first attempt should not be successful. After modestly asking permission to try again, he ventured on the second occasion to arrive at a happy discovery. Lifting the perforated paper, he placed it delicately over the page which contained the unintelligible writing. Words and sentences now appeared (through the holes in the paper) in their right spelling and arrangement, and addressed Sir Giles in these terms:

'I beg to thank you, sir, for complying with my conditions. You have satisfied me of your good faith. At the same time, it is possible that you may hesitate to trust a man who is not yet able to admit you to his confidence. The perilous position in which I stand obliges me to ask for two or three days more of delay, before I can safely make an appointment with you. Pray be patient—and

on no account apply for advice or protection to the police.'

'Those last words,' Sir Giles declared, 'are conclusive! The sooner I am under the care of the law the better. Take my card to the police-office.'

'May I say a word first, sir?'

'Do you mean that you don't agree with me?'

'I mean that.'

'You were always an obstinate man, Dennis; and it grows on you as you get older. Never mind! Let's have it out. Who do *you* say is the person pointed at in these rascally letters?'

The head clerk took up the first letter of the two, and pointed to the opening sentence: 'Sir Giles Mountjoy,—I have a disclosure to make in which one of the members of your family is seriously interested.' Dennis emphatically repeated the words: 'one of the

members of your family.' His employer regarded him with a broad stare of astonishment.

'One of the members of my family?' Sir Giles repeated, on his side. 'Why, man alive, what are you thinking of? I'm an old bachelor, and I haven't got a family.'

'There is your brother, sir.'

'My brother is in France—out of the way of the wretches who are threatening me. I wish I was with him!'

'There are your brother's two sons, Sir Giles.'

'Well? And what is there to be afraid of? My nephew, Hugh, is in London—and, mind! not on a political errand. I hope, before long, to hear that he is going to be married—if the strangest and nicest girl in England will have him. What's wrong now?'

Dennis explained. 'I only wished to say, sir, that I was thinking of your other nephew.'

Sir Giles laughed. 'Arthur in danger!' he exclaimed. 'As harmless a young man as ever lived. The worst one can say of him is that he is throwing away his money—farming in Kerry.'

'Excuse me, Sir Giles; there's not much chance of his throwing away his money, where he is now. Nobody will venture to take his money. I met with one of Mr. Arthur's neighbours at the market yesterday. Your nephew is boycotted.'

'So much the better,' the obstinate banker declared. 'He will be cured of his craze for farming; and he will come back to the place I am keeping for him in the office.'

'God grant it!' the clerk said fervently.

For the moment, Sir Giles was staggered. 'Have you heard something that you haven't told me yet?' he asked.

'No, sir. I am only bearing in mind something which—with all respect—I think

you have forgotten. The last tenant on that bit of land in Kerry refused to pay his rent. Mr. Arthur has taken what they call an evicted farm. It's my firm belief,' said the head clerk, rising and speaking earnestly, 'that the person who has addressed those letters to you knows Mr. Arthur, and knows he is in danger—and is trying to save your nephew (by means of your influence), at the risk of his own life.'

Sir Giles shook his head. 'I call that a far-fetched interpretation, Dennis. If what you say is true, why didn't the writer of those anonymous letters address himself to Arthur, instead of to me?'

'I gave it as my opinion just now, sir, that the writer of the letter knew Mr. Arthur.'

'So you did. And what of that?'

Dennis stood to his guns.

'Anybody who is acquainted with Mr.

Arthur,' he persisted, 'knows that (with all sorts of good qualities) the young gentleman is headstrong and rash. If a friend told him he was in danger on the farm, that would be enough of itself to make him stop where he is, and brave it out. Whereas you, sir, are known to be cautious and careful, and far-seeing and discreet.' He might have added: And cowardly and obstinate, and narrow-minded and inflated by stupid self-esteem. But respect for his employer had blindfolded the clerk's observation for many a long year past. If one man may be born with the heart of a lion, another man may be born with the mind of a mule. Dennis's master was one of the other men.

'Very well put,' Sir Giles answered indulgently. 'Time will show, if such an entirely unimportant person as my nephew Arthur is likely to be assassinated. That allusion to one of the members of my family is a mere

equivocation, designed to throw me off my guard. Rank, money, social influence, unswerving principles, mark ME out as a public character. Go to the police-office, and let the best man who happens to be off duty come here directly.'

Good Dennis Howmore approached the door very unwillingly. It was opened, from the outer side, before he had reached that end of the room. One of the bank porters announced a visitor.

'Miss Henley wishes to know, sir, if you can see her.'

Sir Giles looked agreeably surprised. He rose with alacrity to receive the lady.

III

WHEN Iris Henley dies there will, in all probability, be friends left who will remember her and talk of her —and there may be strangers present at the time (women for the most part), whose curiosity will put questions relating to her personal appearance. No replies will reward them with trustworthy information. Miss Henley's chief claim to admiration lay in a remarkable mobility of expression, which reflected every change of feeling peculiar to the nature of a sweet and sensitive woman. For this reason, probably, no descriptions of her will agree with each other. No existing likenesses will represent her. The one portrait that was painted of Iris is only recognisable

by partial friends of the artist. In and out of London, photographic likenesses were taken of her. They have the honour of resembling the portraits of Shakespeare in this respect—compared with one another, it is not possible to discover that they present the same person. As for the evidence offered by the loving memory of her friends, it is sure to be contradictory in the last degree. She had a charming face, a commonplace face, an intelligent face—a poor complexion, a delicate complexion, no complexion at all—eyes that were expressive of a hot temper, of a bright intellect, of a firm character, of an affectionate disposition, of a truthful nature, of hysterical sensibility, of inveterate obstinacy—a figure too short; no, just the right height; no, neither one thing nor the other; elegant, if you like—dress shabby: oh, surely not; dress quiet and simple; no, something more than that; ostentatiously quiet, theatrically simple,

worn with the object of looking unlike other people. In one last word, was this mass of contradictions generally popular, in the time when it was a living creature? Yes—among the men. No—not invariably. The man of all others who ought to have been fondest of her was the man who behaved cruelly to Iris—her own father. And, when the poor creature married (if she did marry), how many of you attended the wedding? Not one of us! And when she died, how many of you were sorry for her? All of us! What? no difference of opinion in that one particular? On the contrary, perfect concord, thank God.

Let the years roll back, and let Iris speak for herself, at the memorable time when she was in the prime of her life, and when a stormy career was before her.

IV

BEING Miss Henley's godfather, Sir Giles was a privileged person. He laid his hairy hands on her shoulders, and kissed her on either cheek. After that prefatory act of endearment, he made his inquiries. What extraordinary combination of events had led Iris to leave London, and had brought her to visit him in his banking-house at Ardoon?

'I wanted to get away from home,' she answered; 'and having nobody to go to but my godfather, I thought I should like to see You.'

'Alone!' cried Sir Giles.

'No—with my maid to keep me company.'

'Only your maid, Iris? Surely you have acquaintances among young ladies like yourself?'

'Acquaintances—yes. No friends.'

'Does your father approve of what you have done?'

'Will you grant me a favour, godpapa?'

'Yes—if I can.'

'Don't insist on my answering your last question.'

The faint colour that had risen in her face, when she entered the room, left it. At the same time, the expression of her mouth altered. The lips closed firmly; revealing that strongest of all resolutions which is founded on a keen sense of wrong. She looked older than her age: what she might be ten years hence, she was now. Sir Giles understood her. He got up, and took a turn in the room. An old habit, of which he had cured himself with infinite difficulty when he

was made a Knight, showed itself again. He put his hands in his pockets.

'You and your father have had another quarrel,' he said, stopping opposite Iris.

'I don't deny it,' she replied.

'Who is to blame?'

She smiled bitterly. 'The woman is always to blame.'

'Did your father tell you that?'

'My father reminded me that I was twenty-one years old, last birthday—and told me that I could do as I liked. I understood him, and I left the house.'

'You will go back again, I suppose?'

'I don't know.'

Sir Giles began pacing the room once more. His rugged face, telling its story of disaster and struggle in early life, showed signs of disappointment and distress.

'Hugh promised to write to me,' he said, 'and he has not written. I know what that

means; I know what you have done to offend your father. My nephew has asked you to marry him for the second time. And for the second time you have refused.'

Her face softened; its better and younger aspect revived. 'Yes,' she said, sadly and submissively; 'I have refused him again.'

Sir Giles lost his temper. 'What the devil is your objection to Hugh?' he burst out.

'My father said the same thing to me,' she replied, 'almost in the same words. I made him angry when I tried to give my reason. I don't want to make you angry, too.'

He took no notice of this. 'Isn't Hugh a good fellow?' he went on. 'Isn't he affectionate? and kindhearted? and honourable? —aye, and a handsome man too, if you come to that.'

'Hugh is all that you say. I like him; I admire him; I owe to his kindness some of the happiest days of my sad life, and I am

grateful—oh, with all my heart, I am grateful to Hugh!'

'If that's true, Iris——'

'Every word of it is true.'

'I say, if that's true—there's no excuse for you. I hate perversity in a young woman! Why don't you marry him?'

'Try to feel for me,' she said gently; 'I can't love him.'

Her tone said more to the banker than her words had expressed. The secret sorrow of her life, which was known to her father, was known also to Sir Giles.

'Now we have come to it at last!' he said. 'You can't love my nephew Hugh. And you won't tell me the reason why, because your sweet temper shrinks from making me angry. Shall I mention the reason for you, my dear? I can do it in two words—Lord Harry.'

She made no reply; she showed no sign of

feeling what he had just said. Her head sank a little; her hands clasped themselves on her lap; the obstinate resignation which can submit to anything hardened her face, stiffened her figure—and that was all.

The banker was determined not to spare her.

'It's easy to see,' he resumed, 'that you have not got over your infatuation for that vagabond yet. Go where he may, into the vilest places and among the lowest people, he carries your heart along with him. I wonder you are not ashamed of such an attachment as that.'

He had stung her at last. She roused herself, and answered him.

'Harry has led a wild life,' she said; 'he has committed serious faults, and he may live to do worse than he has done yet. To what degradation, bad company, and a bad bringing up may yet lead him, I leave his enemies

to foresee. But I tell you this, he has redeeming qualities which you, and people like you, are not good Christians enough to discover. He has friends who can still appreciate him—your nephew, Arthur Mountjoy, is one of them. Oh, I know it by Arthur's letters to me! Blame Lord Harry as you may, I tell you he has the capacity for repentance in him, and one day—when it is too late, I dare say—he will show it. I can never be his wife. We are parted, never in all likelihood to meet again. Well! he is the only man whom I have ever loved; and he is the only man whom I ever shall love. If you think this state of mind proves that I am as bad as he is, I won't contradict you. Do we any of us know how bad we are?—Have you heard of Harry lately?'

The sudden transition, from an earnest and devoted defence of the man, to an easy and familiar inquiry about him, startled Sir Giles.

For the moment he had nothing to say; Iris had made him think. She had shown a capacity for mastering her strongest feelings, at the moment when they threatened to overcome her, which is very rarely found in a young woman. How to manage her was a problem for patient resolution to solve. The banker's obstinacy, rather than his conviction, had encouraged him to hold to the hope of Hugh's marriage, even after his nephew had been refused for the second time. His headstrong goddaughter had come to visit him of her own accord. She had not forgotten the days of her childhood, when he had some influence over her—when she had found him kinder to her than her father had ever been. Sir Giles saw that he had taken the wrong tone with Iris. His anger had not alarmed her; his opinion had not influenced her. In Hugh's interests he determined to try what consideration and

indulgence would do towards cultivating the growth of her regard for him. Finding that she had left her maid and her luggage at the hotel, he hospitably insisted on their removal to his own house.

'While you are in Ardoon, Iris, you are my guest,' he said.

She pleased him by readily accepting the invitation—and then annoyed him by asking again if he had heard anything of Lord Harry.

He answered shortly and sharply: 'I have heard nothing. What is *your* last news of him?'

'News,' she said, 'which I sincerely hope is not true. An Irish paper has been sent to me, which reports that he has joined the secret society—nothing better than a society of assassins, I am afraid—which is known by the name of the Invincibles.'

As she mentioned that formidable brotherhood, Dennis Howmore returned from the police-office. He announced that a Sergeant was then waiting to receive instructions from Sir Giles.

V

IRIS rose to go. Her godfather courteously stopped her.

'Wait here,' he said, 'until I have spoken to the Sergeant, and I will escort you to my house. My clerk will do what is necessary at the hotel. You don't look quite satisfied. Is the arrangement that I have proposed not agreeable to you?'

Iris assured him that she gratefully acceded to the arrangement. At the same time, she confessed to having been a little startled on discovering that he was in consultation with the police. 'I remember that we are in Ireland,' she explained, 'and I am foolish enough to fear that you may be in some danger. May I hope that it is only a trifle?'

Only a trifle! Among other deficient sensibilities in the strange nature of Iris, Sir Giles had observed an imperfect appreciation of the dignity of his social position. Here was a new proof of it! The temptation to inspire sentiments of alarm—not unmingled with admiration—in the mind of his insensible god-daughter, by exhibiting himself as a public character threatened by a conspiracy, was more than the banker's vanity could resist. Before he left the room, he instructed Dennis to tell Miss Henley what had happened, and to let her judge for herself whether he had been needlessly alarmed by what she was pleased to call 'a mere trifle.'

Dennis Howmore must have been more than mortal, if he could have related his narrative of events without being influenced by his own point of view. On the first occasion when he mentioned Arthur Mountjoy's name

Iris showed a sudden interest in his strange story which took him by surprise.

'You know Mr. Arthur?' he said.

'Know him!' Iris repeated. 'He was my playfellow when we were both children. He is as dear to me as if he was my brother. Tell me at once—is he really in danger?'

Dennis honestly repeated what he had already said, on that subject, to his master. Miss Henley, entirely agreeing with him, was eager to warn Arthur of his position. There was no telegraphic communication with the village which was near his farm. She could only write to him, and she did write to him, by that day's post—having reasons of her own for anxiety, which forbade her to show her letter to Dennis. Well aware of the devoted friendship which united Lord Harry and Arthur Mountjoy—and bearing in mind the newspaper report of the Irish lord's rash association with the Invincibles—her fears now identified

the noble vagabond as the writer of the anonymous letters, which had so seriously excited her godfather's doubts of his own safety.

When Sir Giles returned and took her with him to his house, he spoke of his consultation with the Sergeant in terms which increased her dread of what might happen in the future. She was a dull and silent guest, during the interval that elapsed before it would be possible to receive Arthur's reply. The day arrived—and the post brought no relief to her anxieties. The next day passed without a letter. On the morning of the fourth day, Sir Giles rose later than usual. His correspondence was sent to him from the office, at breakfast-time. After opening one of the letters, he despatched a messenger in hot haste to the police.

'Look at that,' he said, handing the letter to Iris. 'Does the assassin take me for a fool?'

She read the lines that follow:

'Unforeseen events force me, Sir Giles, to run a serious risk. I must speak to you, and it must not be by daylight. My one hope of safety is in darkness. Meet me at the first milestone, on the road to Garvan, when the moon sets at ten o'clock to-night. No need to mention your name. The password is: *Fidelity*.'

'Do you mean to go?' Iris asked.

'Do I mean to be murdered!' Sir Giles broke out. 'My dear child, do pray try to think before you speak. The Sergeant will represent me, of course.'

'And take the man prisoner?' Iris added.

'Certainly!'

With that startling reply, the banker hurried away to receive the police in another room. Iris dropped into the nearest chair. The turn that the affair had now taken filled her with unutterable dismay.

Sir Giles came back, after no very long absence, composed and smiling. The course of proceeding had been settled to his complete satisfaction.

Dressed in private clothes, the Sergeant was to go to the milestone at the appointed time, representing the banker in the darkness, and giving the password. He was to be followed by two of his men who would wait in concealment, within hearing of his whistle, if their services were required. 'I want to see the ruffian when he is safely handcuffed,' Sir Giles explained; 'and I have arranged to wait for the police, to-night, at my office.'

There was but one desperate way that Iris could now discern of saving the man who had confided in her godfather's honour, and whose trust had already been betrayed. Never had she loved the outlawed Irish lord—the man whom she was forbidden, and rightly forbidden, to marry—as she loved him at that

moment. Let the risk be what it might, this resolute woman had determined that the Sergeant should not be the only person who arrived at the milestone, and gave the password. There was one devoted friend to Lord Harry, whom she could always trust—and that friend was herself.

Sir Giles withdrew, to look after his business at the bank. She waited until the clock had struck the servants' dinner hour, and then ascended the stairs to her godfather's dressing-room. Opening his wardrobe, she discovered in one part of it a large Spanish cloak, and, in another part, a high-crowned felt hat which he wore on his country excursions. In the dark, here was disguise enough for her purpose.

As she left the dressing-room, a measure of precaution occurred to her, which she put in action at once. Telling her maid that she had some purchases to make in the town, she

went out, and asked her way to Garvan of the first respectable stranger whom she met in the street. Her object was to walk as far as the first milestone, in daylight, so as to be sure of finding it again by night. She had made herself familiar with the different objects on the road, when she returned to the banker's house.

As the time for the arrest drew nearer, Sir Giles became too restless to wait patiently at home. He went away to the police-office, eager to hear if any new counter-conspiracy had occurred to the authorities.

It was dark soon after eight o'clock, at that time of the year. At nine the servants assembled at the supper-table. They were all downstairs together, talking, and waiting for their meal.

Feeling the necessity of arriving at the place of meeting in time to keep out of the Sergeant's way, Iris assumed her disguise as

the clock struck nine. She left the house without a living creature to notice her, indoors or out. Clouds were gathering over the sky. The waning moon was only to be seen at intervals, as she set forth on her way to the milestone.

VI

THE wind rose a little, and the rifts in the clouds began to grow broader as Iris gained the high road.

For a while the glimmer of the misty moonlight lit the way before her. As well as she could guess, she had passed over more than half of the distance between the town and the milestone before the sky darkened again. Ob-

jects by the wayside grew shadowy and dim. A few drops of rain began to fall. The milestone, as she knew—thanks to the discovery of it made by daylight—was on the right-hand side of the road. But the dull grey colour of the stone was not easy to see in the dark.

A doubt troubled her whether she might not have passed the milestone. She stopped and looked at the sky.

The threatening of rain had passed away; signs showed themselves which seemed to promise another break in the clouds. She waited. Low and faint, the sinking moonlight looked its last at the dull earth. In front of her there was nothing to be seen but the road. She looked back—and discovered the milestone.

A rough stone wall protected the land on either side of the road. Nearly behind the milestone there was a gap in this fence, par-

tially closed by a hurdle. A half-ruined culvert, arching a ditch that had run dry, formed a bridge leading from the road to the field. Had the field been already chosen as a place of concealment by the police? Nothing was to be seen but a footpath, and the dusky line of a plantation beyond it. As she made these discoveries, the rain began to fall again; the clouds gathered once more; the moonlight vanished.

At the same moment an obstacle presented itself to her mind, which Iris had thus far failed to foresee.

Lord Harry might approach the milestone by three different ways: that is to say—by the road from the town, or by the road from the open country, or by way of the field and the culvert. How could she so place herself as to be sure of warning him, before he fell into the hands of the police? To watch the three means of approach in the obscurity of

the night, and at one and the same time, was impossible.

A man in this position, guided by reason, would in all probability have wasted precious time in trying to arrive at the right decision. A woman, aided by love, conquered the difficulty that confronted her in a moment.

Iris decided on returning to the milestone, and on waiting there to be discovered and taken prisoner by the police. Supposing Lord Harry to be punctual to his appointment, he would hear voices and movements, as a necessary consequence of the arrest, in time to make his escape. Supposing him on the other hand to be late, the police would be on the way back to the town with their prisoner : he would find no one at the milestone, and would leave it again in safety.

She was on the point of turning, to get back to the road, when something on the dark surface of the field, which looked like a

darker shadow, became dimly visible. In another moment, it seemed to be a shadow that moved. She ran towards it. It looked like a man as she drew nearer. The man stopped.

'The password,' he said, in tones cautiously lowered.

'Fidelity,' she answered in a whisper.

It was too dark for a recognition of his features; but Iris knew him by his tall stature—knew him by the accent in which he had asked for the password. Erroneously judging of her, on his side, as a man, he drew back again. Sir Giles Mountjoy was above the middle height; the stranger, in a cloak, who had whispered to him, was below it. 'You are not the person I expected to meet,' he said. 'Who are you?'

Her faithful heart was longing to tell him the truth. The temptation to reveal herself and to make the sweet confession of her happiness at having saved him, would have

overpowered her discretion, but for a sound that was audible on the road behind them. In the deep silence of the time and place, mistake was impossible. It was the sound of footsteps.

There was just time to whisper to him: 'Sir Giles has betrayed you. Save yourself.'

'Thank you, whoever you are!'

With that reply, he suddenly and swiftly disappeared. Iris remembered the culvert, and turned towards it. There was a hiding-place under the arch, if she could only get down into the dry ditch in time. She was feeling her way to the slope of it with her feet, when a heavy hand seized her by the arm; and a resolute voice said, 'You are my prisoner.'

She was led back into the road. The man who had got her blew a whistle. Two other men joined him.

'Show a light,' he said; 'and let's see who the fellow is.'

The shade was slipped aside from a lantern: the light fell full on the prisoner's face. Amazement petrified the two attendant policemen. The pious Catholic Sergeant burst into speech: 'Holy Mary! it's a woman!'

Did the secret societies of Ireland enrol women? Was this a modern Judith, expressing herself by anonymous letters, and bent on assassinating a financial Holofernes who kept a bank? What account had she to give of herself? How came she to be alone in a desolate field on a rainy night? Instead of answering these questions, the inscrutable stranger preferred a bold and brief request. 'Take me to Sir Giles,' was all she said to the police.

The Sergeant had the handcuffs ready. After looking at the prisoner's delicate wrists by the lantern-light, he put his fetters back

in his pocket. 'A lady—and no doubt about it,' he said to one of his assistants.

The two men waited, with a mischievous interest in seeing what he would do next. The list of their pious officer's virtues included a constitutional partiality for women, which exhibited the merciful side of justice when a criminal wore a petticoat. 'We will take you to Sir Giles, miss,' he said—and offered his arm, instead of offering his handcuffs. Iris understood him, and took his arm.

She was silent—unaccountably silent as the men thought—on the way to the town. They heard her sigh; and, once, the sigh sounded more like a sob; little did they suspect what was in that silent woman's mind at the time.

The one object which had absorbed the attention of Iris had been the saving of Lord Harry. This accomplished, the free exercise

of her memory had now reminded her of Arthur Mountjoy.

It was impossible to doubt that the object of the proposed meeting at the milestone had been to take measures for the preservation of the young man's life. A coward is always more or less cruel. The proceedings (equally treacherous and merciless) by which Sir Giles had provided for his own safety, had delayed —perhaps actually prevented—the execution of Lord Harry's humane design. It was possible, horribly possible, that a prompt employment of time might have been necessary to the rescue of Arthur from impending death by murder. In the agitation that overpowered her, Iris actually hurried the police on their return to the town.

Sir Giles had arranged to wait for news in his private room at the office—and there he was, with Dennis Howmore in attendance to receive visitors.

The Sergeant went into the banker's room alone, to make his report. He left the door ajar; Iris could hear what passed.

'Have you got your prisoner?' Sir Giles began.

'Yes, your honour.'

'Is the wretch securely handcuffed?'

'I beg your pardon, sir, it isn't a man.'

'Nonsense, Sergeant; it can't be a boy.'

The Sergeant confessed that it was not a boy. 'It's a woman,' he said.

'What!!!'

'A woman,' the patient officer repeated—'and a young one. She asked for You.'

'Bring her in.'

Iris was not the sort of person who waits to be brought in. She walked in, of her own accord.

VII

'GOOD HEAVENS!' cried Sir Giles. 'Iris! With my cloak on!! With my hat in her hand!!! Sergeant, there has been some dreadful mistake. This is my goddaughter—Miss Henley.'

'We found her at the milestone, your honour. The young lady, and nobody else.'

Sir Giles appealed helplessly to his goddaughter. 'What does this mean?' Instead of answering, she looked at the Sergeant. The Sergeant, conscious of responsibility, stood his ground and looked at Sir Giles. His face confessed that the Irish sense of humour was tickled; but he showed no intention of leaving the room. Sir Giles saw that Iris would enter into no explanation in the man's

presence. 'You needn't wait any longer,' he said.

'What am I to do, if you please, with the prisoner?' the Sergeant inquired.

Sir Giles waived that unnecessary question away with his hand. He was trebly responsible—as knight, banker, and magistrate into the bargain. 'I will be answerable,' he replied, 'for producing Miss Henley, if called upon. Good-night.'

The Sergeant's sense of duty was satisfied. He made the military salute. His gallantry added homage to the young lady under the form of a bow. Then, and then only, he walked with dignity out of the room.

'Now,' Sir Giles resumed, 'I presume I may expect to receive an explanation. What does this impropriety mean? What were you doing at the milestone?'

'I was saving the person who made the appointment with you,' Iris said; 'the poor

fellow who had no ill-will towards you—who had risked everything to save your nephew's life. Oh, sir, you committed a terrible mistake when you refused to trust that man!'

Sir Giles had anticipated the appearance of fear, and the reality of humble apologies. She had answered him indignantly, with a heightened colour, and with tears in her eyes. His sense of his own social importance was wounded to the quick. 'Who is the man you are speaking of?' he asked loftily. 'And what is your excuse for having gone to the milestone to save him—hidden under my cloak, disguised in my hat?'

'Don't waste precious time in asking questions!' was the desperate reply. 'Undo the harm that you have done already. Your help—oh, I mean what I say!—may yet preserve Arthur's life. Go to the farm, and save him.'

Sir Giles's anger assumed a new form; it indulged in an elaborate mockery of respect. He took his watch from his pocket, and consulted it satirically. 'Must I make an excuse?' he asked, with a clumsy assumption of humility.

'No! you must go.'

'Permit me to inform you, Miss Henley, that the last train started more than two hours since.'

'What does that matter? You are rich enough to hire a train.'

Sir Giles, the actor, could endure it no longer; he dropped the mask, and revealed Sir Giles, the man. His clerk was summoned by a peremptory ring of the bell. 'Attend Miss Henley to the house,' he said. 'You may come to your senses after a night's rest,' he continued, turning sternly to Iris. 'I will receive your excuses in the morning.'

In the morning, the breakfast was ready

as usual at nine o'clock. Sir Giles found himself alone at the table.

He sent an order to one of the women-servants to knock at Miss Henley's door. There was a long delay. The housekeeper presented herself in a state of alarm; she had gone upstairs to make the necessary investigation in her own person. Miss Henley was not in her room; the maid was not in her room; the beds had been slept in; the heavy luggage was labelled: 'To be called for from the hotel.' And there was an end of the evidence which the absent Iris had left behind her.

Inquiries were made at the hotel. The young lady had called there, with her maid, early on that morning. They had their travelling-bags with them; and Miss Henley had left directions that the luggage was to be placed under care of the landlord until her return.

To what destination she had betaken herself nobody knew.

Sir Giles was too angry to remember what she had said to him on the previous night, or he might have guessed at the motive which had led to her departure. 'Her father has done with her already,' he said; 'and I have done with her now.' The servants received orders not to admit Miss Henley, if her audacity contemplated a return to her godfather's house.

VIII

ON the afternoon of the same day, Iris arrived at the village situated in the near neighbourhood of Arthur Mountjoy's farm.

The infection of political excitement (otherwise, the hatred of England) had spread even to this remote place. On the steps of his little chapel, the priest, a peasant himself, was haranguing his brethren of the soil. An Irishman who paid his landlord was a traitor to his country; an Irishman who asserted his free birthright in the land that he walked on was an enlightened patriot. Such was the new law which the reverend gentleman expounded to his attentive audience. If his brethren there would like him to tell them

how they might apply the law, this exemplary Christian would point to the faithless Irishman, Arthur Mountjoy. 'Buy not of him; sell not to him; avoid him if he approaches you; starve him out of the place. I might say more, boys—you know what I mean.'

To hear the latter part of this effort of oratory, without uttering a word of protest, was a trial of endurance under which Iris trembled. The secondary effect of the priest's address was to root the conviction of Arthur's danger with tenfold tenacity in her mind. After what she had just heard, even the slightest delay in securing his safety might be productive of deplorable results. She astonished a barefooted boy, on the outskirts of the crowd, by a gift of sixpence, and asked her way to the farm. The little Irishman ran on before her, eager to show the generous lady how useful he could be. In less than half an hour, Iris and her maid were at the

door of the farm-house. No such civilised inventions appeared as a knocker or a bell. The boy used his knuckles instead—and ran away when he heard the lock of the door turned on the inner side. He was afraid to be seen speaking to any living creature who inhabited the 'evicted farm.'

A decent old woman appeared, and inquired suspiciously 'what the ladies wanted.' The accent in which she spoke was unmistakably English. When Iris asked for Mr. Arthur Mountjoy the reply was: 'Not at home.' The housekeeper inhospitably attempted to close the door. 'Wait one moment,' Iris said. 'Years have changed you; but there is something in your face which is not quite strange to me. Are you Mrs. Lewson?'

The woman admitted that this was her name. 'But how is it that you are a stranger to me?' she asked distrustfully.

'If you have been long in Mr. Mountjoy's service,' Iris replied, 'you may perhaps have heard him speak of Miss Henley?'

Mrs. Lewson's face brightened in an instant; she threw the door wide open with a glad cry of recognition.

'Come in, miss, come in! Who would have thought of seeing you in this horrible place? Yes; I was the nurse who looked after you all three — when you and Mr. Arthur and Mr. Hugh were playfellows together.' Her eyes rested longingly on her favourite of bygone days. The sensitive sympathies of Iris interpreted that look. She prettily touched her cheek, inviting the nurse to kiss her. At this act of kindness the poor old woman broke down: she apologised quaintly for her tears: 'Think, miss, how *I* must remember that happy time—when *you* have not forgotten it.'

Shown into the parlour, the first object

which the visitor noticed was the letter that she had written to Arthur lying unopened on the table.

'Then he is really out of the house?' she said, with a feeling of relief.

He had been away from the farm for a week or more. Had he received a warning from some other quarter? and had he wisely sought refuge in flight? The amazement in the housekeeper's face, when she heard these questions, pleaded for a word of explanation. Iris acknowledged without reserve the motives which had suggested her journey, and asked eagerly if she had been mistaken in assuming that Arthur was in danger of assassination.

Mrs. Lewson shook her head. Beyond all doubt the young master was in danger. But Miss Iris ought to have known his nature better than to suppose that he would beat a retreat, if all the land-leaguers in Ireland

threatened him together. No! It was his bold way to laugh at danger. He had left his farm to visit a friend in the next county; and it was shrewdly guessed that a young lady who was staying in the house was the attraction which had kept him so long away. 'Anyhow, he means to come back to-morrow,' Mrs. Lewson said. 'I wish he would think better of it, and make his escape to England while he has the chance. If the savages in these parts must shoot somebody, I'm here—an old woman that can't last much longer. Let them shoot me.'

Iris asked if Arthur's safety was assured in the next county, and in the house of his friend.

'I can't say, miss; I have never been to the house. He is in danger if he persists in coming back to the farm. There are chances of shooting him all along his road home. Oh, yes; he knows it, poor dear, as well as I do.

But, there!—men like him are such perverse creatures. He takes his rides just as usual. No; he won't listen to an old woman like me; and as for friends to advise him, the only one of them that has darkened our doors is a scamp who had better have kept away. You may have heard tell of him. The old earl, his wicked father, used to be called by a bad name. And the wild young lord is his father's true son.'

'Not Lord Harry?' Iris exclaimed.

The outbreak of agitation in her tone and manner was silently noticed by her maid. The housekeeper did not attempt to conceal the impression that had been produced upon her. 'I hope you don't know such a vagabond as that?' she said very seriously. 'Perhaps you are thinking of his brother—the eldest son—a respectable man, as I have been told?'

Miss Henley passed over these questions

without notice. Urged by the interest in her lover, which was now more than ever an interest beyond her control, she said: 'Is Lord Harry in danger, on account of his friend?'

'He has nothing to fear from the wretches who infest our part of the country,' Mrs. Lewson replied. 'Report says he's one of themselves. The police—there's what his young lordship has to be afraid of, if all's true that is said about him. Anyhow, when he paid his visit to my master he came secretly like a thief in the night. And I heard Mr. Arthur, while they were together here in the parlour, loud in blaming him for something that he had done. No more, Miss, of Lord Harry! I have something particular to say to you. Suppose I promise to make you comfortable—will you please wait here till to-morrow, and see Mr. Arthur and speak

to him? If there's a person living who can persuade him to take better care of himself, I do believe it will be you.'

Iris readily consented to wait for Arthur Mountjoy's return. Left together, while Mrs. Lewson was attending to her domestic duties, the mistress noticed an appearance of preoccupation in the maid's face.

'Are you beginning to wish, Rhoda,' she said, 'that I had not brought you to this strange place, among these wild people?'

The maid was a quiet amiable girl, evidently in delicate health. She smiled faintly. 'I was thinking, Miss, of another nobleman besides the one Mrs. Lewson mentioned just now, who seems to have led a reckless life. It was printed in a newspaper that I read before we left London.'

'Was his name mentioned?' Iris asked.

'No, Miss; I suppose they were afraid of giving offence. He tried so many strange

ways of getting a living—it was almost like reading a story-book.'

The suppression of the name suggested a suspicion from which Iris recoiled. Was it possible that her maid could be ignorantly alluding to Lord Harry?

'Do you remember this hero's adventures?' she said.

'I can try, Miss, if you wish to hear about him.'

The newspaper narrative appeared to have produced a vivid impression on Rhoda's mind. Making allowance for natural hesitations and mistakes, and difficulties in expressing herself correctly, she repeated with a singularly clear recollection the substance of what she had read.

IX

THE principal characters in the story were an old Irish nobleman, who was called the Earl, and the youngest of his two sons, mysteriously distinguished as 'the wild lord.'

It was said of the Earl that he had not been a good father; he had cruelly neglected both his sons. The younger one, badly treated at school, and left to himself in the holidays, began his adventurous career by running away. He got employment (under an assumed name) as a ship's boy. At the outset, he did well; learning his work, and being liked by the Captain and the crew. But the chief mate was a brutal man, and the

young runaway's quick temper resented the disgraceful infliction of blows. He made up his mind to try his luck on shore, and attached himself to a company of strolling players. Being a handsome lad, with a good figure and a fine clear voice, he did very well for a while on the country stage. Hard times came; salaries were reduced; the adventurer wearied of the society of actors and actresses. His next change of life presented him in North Britain as a journalist, employed on a Scotch newspaper. An unfortunate love-affair was the means of depriving him of this new occupation. He was recognised, soon afterwards, serving as assistant-steward in one of the passenger steamers voyaging between Liverpool and New York. Arrived in this last city, he obtained notoriety, of no very respectable kind, as a 'medium' claiming powers of supernatural communication with the world of spirits. When the imposture was ultimately

discovered, he had gained money by his unworthy appeal to the meanly prosaic superstition of modern times. A long interval had then elapsed, and nothing had been heard of him, when a starving man was discovered by a traveller lost on a Western prairie. The ill-fated Irish lord had associated himself with an Indian tribe—had committed some offence against their laws—and had been deliberately deserted and left to die. On his recovery, he wrote to his elder brother (who had inherited the title and estates on the death of the old Earl) to say that he was ashamed of the life that he had led, and eager to make amendment by accepting any honest employment that could be offered to him. The traveller who had saved his life, and whose opinion was to be trusted, declared that the letter represented a sincerely penitent state of mind. There were good qualities in the vagabond, which only wanted a little merciful encouragement to

assert themselves. The reply that he received from England came from the lawyers employed by the new Earl. They had arranged with their agents in New York to pay to the younger brother a legacy of a thousand pounds, which represented all that had been left to him by his father's will. If he wrote again, his letters would not be answered; his brother had done with him. Treated in this inhuman manner, the wild lord became once more worthy of his name. He tried a new life as a betting man at races and trotting-matches. Fortune favoured him at the outset, and he considerably increased his legacy. With the customary infatuation of men who gain money by risking the loss of it, he presumed on his good luck. One pecuniary disaster followed another, and left him literally penniless. He was found again, in England; exhibiting an open boat, in which he and a companion had made one of those foolhardy voyages across the Atlantic.

which have now happily ceased to interest the public. To a friend who remonstrated with him, he answered that he had reckoned on being lost at sea, and on so committing a suicide worthy of the desperate life that he had led. The last accounts of him, after this, were too vague and too contradictory to be depended on. At one time it was reported that he had returned to the United States. Not long afterwards, unaccountable paragraphs appeared in newspapers, declaring, at one and the same time, that he was living among bad company in Paris, and that he was hiding disreputably in an ill-famed quarter of the city of Dublin, called 'The Liberties.' In any case, there was good reason to fear that Irish-American desperadoes had entangled the wild lord in the network of political conspiracy.

The maid noticed a change in the mistress which surprised her, when she had reached

the end of the newspaper story. Of Miss Henley's customary good spirits not a trace remained. 'Few people, Rhoda, remember what they read as well as you do.' She said it kindly and sadly—and she said no more.

There was a reason for this.

Now at one time, and now at another, Iris had heard of Lord Harry's faults and failings in fragments of family history. The complete record of his degraded life, presented in an uninterrupted succession of events, had now forced itself on her attention for the first time. It naturally shocked her. She felt, as she had never felt before, how entirely right her father had been in insisting on her resistance to an attachment which was unworthy of her. So far, but no farther, her conscience yielded to its own conviction of what was just. But the one unassailable vital force in this world is the force of love. It may submit to the hard necessities of life; it may acknowledge

the imperative claims of duty ; it may be silent under reproach, and submissive to privation—but, suffer what it may, it is the master-passion still, subject to no artificial influences, owning no supremacy but the law of its own being. Iris was above the reach of self-reproach, when her memory recalled the daring action which had saved Lord Harry at the milestone. Her better sense acknowledged Hugh Mountjoy's superiority over the other man—but her heart, her perverse heart, remained true to its first choice in spite of her. She made an impatient excuse, and went out alone, to recover her composure in the farm-house garden.

The hours of the evening passed slowly.

There was a pack of cards in the house; the women tried to amuse themselves, and failed. Anxiety about Arthur preyed on the spirits of Miss Henley and Mrs. Lewson. Even the maid, who had only seen him during his last visit to London, said she wished to-

morrow had come and gone. His sweet temper, his handsome face, his lively talk had made Arthur a favourite everywhere. Mrs. Lewson had left her comfortable English home to be his housekeeper, when he tried his rash experiment of farming in Ireland. And, more wonderful still, even wearisome Sir Giles became an agreeable person in his nephew's company.

Iris set the example of retiring at an early hour to her room.

There was something terrible in the pastoral silence of the place. It associated itself mysteriously with her fears for Arthur; it suggested armed treachery on tiptoe, taking its murderous stand in hiding; the whistling passage of bullets through the air; the piercing cry of a man mortally wounded; and that man perhaps——? Iris shrank from her own horrid thought. A momentary faintness overcame her; she opened the window. As

she put her head out to breathe the cool night air, a man on horseback rode up to the house. Was it Arthur? No: the light-coloured groom's livery that he wore was just visible.

Before he could dismount to knock at the door, a tall man walked up to him out of the darkness.

'Is that Miles?' the tall man asked.

The groom knew the voice. Iris was even better acquainted with it. She, too, recognised Lord Harry.

X

THERE was the Irish lord — at the very time when Iris was most patiently resigned never to see him more, never to think of him as her husband again —reminding her of the first days of r love, and of their mutual confession of Fear of herself kept her behind the cur-

tain; while interest in Lord Harry detained her at the window in hiding.

'All well at Rathco?' he asked—mentioning the name of the house in which Arthur was one of the guests.

'Yes, my lord. Mr. Mountjoy leaves us to-morrow.'

'Does he mean to return to the farm?'

'Sorry I am to say it; he does mean that.'

'Has he fixed any time, Miles, for starting on his journey?'

Miles instituted a search through his pockets, and accompanied it by an explanation. Yes, indeed, Master Arthur had fixed a time; he had written a note to say so to Mistress Lewson the housekeeper; he had said, 'Drop the note at the farm, on your way to the village.' And what might Miles want at the village, in the dark? Medicine, in a hurry, for one of his master's horses that was sick

and sinking. And, speaking of that, here, thank God, was the note!

Iris, listening and watching alternately, saw to her surprise the note intended for Mrs. Lewson handed to Lord Harry. 'Am I expected,' he asked jocosely, 'to read writing without a light?' Miles produced a small lantern which was strapped to his groom's belt. 'There's parts of the road not over safe in the dark,' he said as he raised the shade which guarded the light. The wild lord coolly opened the letter, and read the few careless words which it contained. 'To Mrs. Lewson:—Dear old girl, expect me back to-morrow to dinner at three o'clock.—Yours, ARTHUR.'

There was a pause.

'Are there any strangers at Rathco?' Lord Harry asked.

'Two new men,' Miles replied, 'at work in the grounds.'

There was another pause. 'How can I protect him?' the young lord said partly to himself partly to Miles. He suspected the two new men—spies probably who knew of Arthur's proposed journey home, and who had already reported to their employers the hour at which he would set out.

Miles ventured to say a word: 'I hope you won't be angry with me, my lord——'

'Stuff and nonsense! Was I ever angry with you, when I was rich enough to keep a servant, and when you were the man?'

The Irish groom answered in a voice that trembled with strong feeling. 'You were the best and kindest master that ever lived on this earth. I can't see you putting your precious life in peril——'

'My precious life?' Lord Harry repeated lightly. 'You're thinking of Mr. Mountjoy, when you say that. *His* life is worth saving. As for my life——' He ended the sen-

tence by a whistle, as the best way he could hit on of expressing his contempt for his own existence.

'My lord! my lord!' Miles persisted; 'the Invincibles are beginning to doubt you. If any of them find you hanging about Mr. Mountjoy's farm, they'll try a shot at you first, and ask afterwards whether it was right to kill you or not.'

To hear this said—and said seriously—after the saving of him at the milestone, was a trial of her firmness which Iris was unable to resist. Love got the better of prudence. She drew back the window-curtain. In another moment, she would have added her persuasion to the servant's warning, if Lord Harry himself had not accidentally checked her by a proceeding, on his part, for which she was not prepared.

'Show the light,' he said; 'I'll write a line to Mr. Mountjoy.'

He tore off the blank page from the note to the housekeeper, and wrote to Arthur, entreating him to change the time of his departure from Rathco, and to tell no creature in the house, or out of the house, at what new hour he had arranged to go. 'Saddle your horse yourself,' the letter concluded. It was written in a feigned hand, without a signature.

'Give that to Mr. Mountjoy,' Lord Harry said. 'If he asks who wrote it, don't frighten him about me by telling the truth. Lie, Miles! Say you don't know.' He next returned the note for Mrs. Lewson. 'If she notices that it has been opened,' he resumed, 'and asks who has done it, lie again. Good-night, Miles—and mind those dangerous places on your road home.'

The groom darkened his lantern; and the wild lord was lost to view, round the side of the house.

Left by himself, Miles rapped at the door with the handle of his whip. 'A letter from Mr. Arthur,' he called out. Mrs. Lewson at once took the note, and examined it by the light of the candle on the hall-table. 'Somebody has been reading this!' she exclaimed, stepping out to the groom, and showing him the torn envelope. Miles, promptly obeying his instructions, declared that he knew nothing about it, and rode away.

Iris descended the stairs, and joined Mrs. Lewson in the hall before she had closed the door. The housekeeper at once produced Arthur's letter.

'It's on my mind, Miss,' she said, 'to write an answer, and say something to Mr. Arthur which will persuade him to take care of himself, on his way back to the farm. The difficulty is, how am I to express it? You would be doing a kind thing if you would give me a word of advice.'

Iris willingly complied. A second note, from the anxious housekeeper, might help the effect of the few lines which Lord Harry had written.

Arthur's letter informed Iris that he had arranged to return at three o'clock. Lord Harry's question to the groom, and the man's reply, instantly recurred to her memory: 'Are there any strangers at Rathco?'—'Two new men at work in the grounds.' Arriving at the same conclusion which had already occurred to Lord Harry, Iris advised the housekeeper, in writing to Arthur, to entreat him to change the hour, secretly, at which he left his friend's house on the next day. Warmly approving of this idea, Mrs. Lewson hurried into the parlour to write her letter. 'Don't go to bed yet, Miss,' she said; 'I want you to read it before I send it away the first thing to-morrow morning.'

Left alone in the hall, with the door open

before her, Iris looked out on the night, thinking.

The lives of the two men in whom she was interested—in widely different ways—were now both threatened ; and the imminent danger, at that moment, was the danger of Lord Harry. He was an outlaw whose character would not bear investigation ; but, to give him his due, there was no risk which he was not ready to confront for Arthur's sake. If he was still recklessly lingering, on the watch for assassins in the dangerous neighbourhood of the farm, who but herself possessed the influence which would prevail on him to leave the place? She had joined Mrs. Lewson at the door with that conviction in her mind. In another instant, she was out of the house, and beginning her search in the dark.

Iris made the round of the building; sometimes feeling her way in obscure places,

sometimes calling to Lord Harry cautiously by his name. No living creature appeared; no sound of a movement disturbed the stillness of the night. The discovery of his absence, which she had not dared to hope for, was the cheering discovery which she had now made.

On her way back to the house, she became conscious of the rashness of the act into which her own generous impulse had betrayed her.

If she and Lord Harry had met, could she have denied the tender interest in him which her own conduct would then have revealed? Would he not have been justified in concluding that she had pardoned the errors and the vices of his life, and that he might without impropriety remind her of their engagement, and claim her hand in marriage? She trembled as she thought of the concessions which he might have wrung from her.

'Never more,' she determined, 'shall my own folly be answerable for it, if he and I meet again.'

She had returned to Mrs. Lewson, and had read over the letter to Arthur, when the farm clock, striking the hour, reminded them that it was time to retire. They slept badly that night.

At six in the morning, one of the two labourers who had remained faithful to Arthur was sent away on horseback with the housekeeper's reply, and with orders to wait for an answer. Allowing time for giving the horse a rest, the man might be expected to return before noon.

XI

IT was a fine sunshiny day; Mrs. Lewson's spirits began to improve. 'I have always held the belief,' the worthy old woman confessed, 'that bright weather brings good luck—of course provided the day is not a Friday. This is Wednesday. Cheer up, Miss.'

The messenger returned with good news. Mr. Arthur had been as merry as usual. He had made fun of another letter of good advice, received without a signature. 'But Mrs. Lewson must have her way,' he said. 'My love to the old dear—I'll start two hours later and be back to dinner at five.'

'Where did Mr. Arthur give you that message?' Iris inquired.

'At the stables, Miss, while I was putting up the horse. The men about were all on the broad grin when they heard Mr. Arthur's message.'

Still in a morbid state of mind, Iris silently regretted that the message had not been written, instead of being delivered by word of mouth. Here, again, she (like the wild lord) had been afraid of listeners.

The hours wore slowly on until it was past four o'clock. Iris could endure the suspense no longer. 'It's a lovely afternoon,' she said to Mrs. Lewson. 'Let us take a walk along the road, and meet Arthur.' To this proposal the housekeeper readily agreed.

It was nearly five o'clock when they reached a place at which a by-road branched off, through a wood, from the highway which they had hitherto followed. Mrs. Lewson found a seat on a felled tree. 'We had better not go any farther,' she said.

Iris asked if there was any reason for this.

There was an excellent reason. A few yards farther on, the high road had been diverted from the straight line (in the interest of a large agricultural village), and was then directed again into its former course. The by-road through the wood served as a short cut, for horsemen and pedestrians, from one divergent point to the other. It was next to a certainty that Arthur would return by the short cut. But, if accident or caprice led to his preferring the highway, it was clearly necessary to wait for him within view of both the roads.

Too restless to submit to a state of passive expectation, Iris proposed to follow the bridle-path through the wood for a little way, and to return if she failed to see anything of Arthur. 'You are tired,' she said kindly to her companion; 'pray don't move'

Mrs. Lewson looked needlessly uneasy: 'You might lose yourself, Miss. Mind you keep to the path!'

Iris followed the pleasant windings of the woodland track. In the hope of meeting Arthur she considerably extended the length of her walk. The white line of the high road, as it passed the farther end of the wood, showed itself through the trees. She turned at once to rejoin Mrs. Lewson.

On her way back she made a discovery. A ruin which she had not previously noticed showed itself among the trees on her left hand. Her curiosity was excited; she strayed aside to examine it more closely. The crumbling walls, as she approached them, looked like the remains of an ordinary dwelling-house. Age is essential to the picturesque effect of decay; a modern ruin is an unnatural and depressing object—and here the horrid thing was.

As she turned to retrace her steps to the road, a man walked out of the inner space enclosed by all that was left of the dismantled house. A cry of alarm escaped her. Was she the victim of destiny, or the sport of chance? There was the wild lord whom she had vowed never to see again: the master of her heart—perhaps the master of her fate!

Any other man would have been amazed to see her, and would have asked how it had happened that the English lady presented herself to him in an Irish wood. This man enjoyed the delight of seeing her, and accepted it as a blessing that was not to be questioned. 'My angel has dropped from Heaven,' he said. 'May Heaven be praised!'

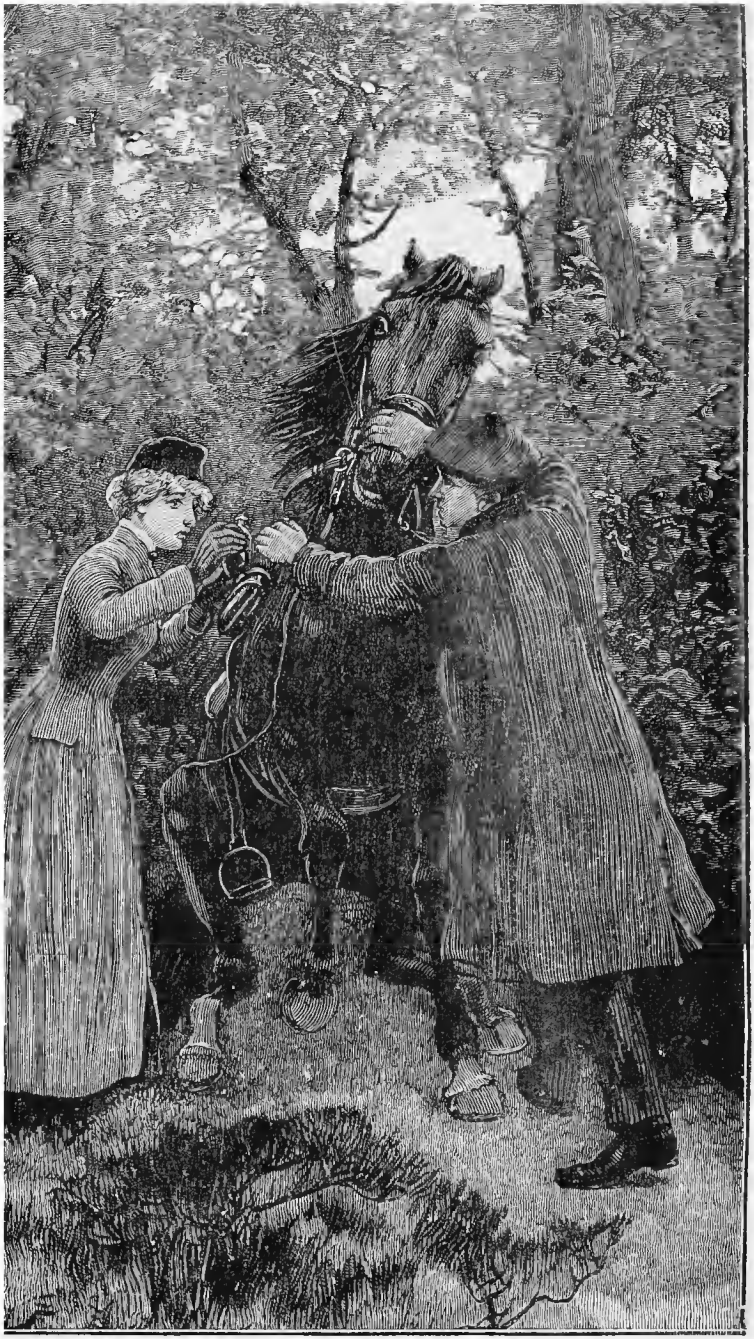
He approached her; his arms closed round her. She struggled to free herself from his embrace. At that moment they both heard the crackle of breaking underwood among the trees behind them. Lord

Harry looked round. 'This is a dangerous place,' he whispered; 'I'm waiting to see Arthur pass safely. Submit to be kissed, or I am a dead man.' His eyes told her that he was truly and fearfully in earnest. Her head sank on his bosom. As he bent down and kissed her, three men approached from their hiding-place among the trees. They had no doubt been watching him, under orders from the murderous brotherhood to which they belonged. Their pistols were ready in their hands—and what discovery had they made? There was the brother who had been denounced as having betrayed them, guilty of no worse treason than meeting his sweetheart in a wood! 'We beg your pardon, my lord,' they cried with a thoroughly Irish enjoyment of their own discomfiture—and burst into a roar of laughter—and left the lovers together. For the second time, Iris had saved Lord Harry at a crisis in his life.

'Let me go!' she pleaded faintly, trembling with superstitious fear for the first time in her experience of herself.

He held her to him as if he would never let her go again. 'Oh, my Sweet, give me a last chance. Help me to be a better man! You have only to will it, Iris, and to make me worthy of you.'

His arms suddenly trembled round her, and dropped. The silence was broken by a distant sound, like the report of a shot. He looked towards the farther end of the wood. In a minute more, the thump of a horse's hoofs at a gallop was audible, where the bridle-path was hidden among the trees. It came nearer — nearer — the creature burst into view, wild with fright, and carrying an empty saddle. Lord Harry rushed into the path, and seized the horse as it swerved at the sight of him. There was a leather pocket attached to the front of the saddle. 'Search



it!' he cried to Iris, forcing the terrified animal back on its haunches. She drew out a silver travelling-flask. One glance at the name engraved on it told him the terrible truth. His trembling hands lost their hold. The horse escaped; the words burst from his lips:

'Oh, God, they've killed him!'

THE END OF THE PROLOGUE

THE STORY

FIRST PERIOD

CHAPTER I

THE SOUR FRENCH WINE

WHILE the line to be taken by the new railway between Culm and Everill was still under discussion, the engineer caused some difference of opinion among the moneyed men who were the first Directors of the Company, by asking if they proposed to include among their stations the little old town of Honeybuzzard.

For years past, commerce had declined, and population had decreased in this ancient and curious place. Painters knew it well,

and prized its mediæval houses as a mine of valuable material for their art. Persons of cultivated tastes, who were interested in church architecture of the fourteenth century, sometimes pleased and flattered the Rector by subscribing to his fund for the restoration of the tower, and the removal of the accumulated rubbish of hundreds of years from the crypt. Small speculators, not otherwise in a state of insanity, settled themselves in the town, and tried the desperate experiment of opening a shop; spent their little capital, put up the shutters, and disappeared. The old market-place still showed its list of market-laws, issued by the Mayor and Corporation in the prosperous bygone times; and every week there were fewer and fewer people to obey the laws. The great empty enclosure looked more cheerful when there was no market held, and when the boys of the town played in the deserted place. In the last warehouse left in

a state of repair, the crane was generally idle; the windows were mostly shut up; and a solitary man represented languishing trade, idling at a half-opened door. The muddy river rose and fell with the distant tide. At rare intervals a collier discharged its cargo on the mouldering quay, or an empty barge took in a load of hay. One bold house advertised, in a dirty window, apartments to let. There was a lawyer in the town, who had no occasion to keep a clerk; and there was a doctor who hoped to sell his practice for anything that it would fetch. The directors of the new railway, after a stormy meeting, decided on offering (by means of a station) a last chance of revival to the dying town. The town had not vitality enough left to be grateful; the railway stimulant produced no effect. Of all his colleagues in Great Britain and Ireland, the station-master at Honeybuzzard was the idlest man—and this, as he said to the unem-

ployed porter, through no want of energy on his own part.

Late on a rainy autumn afternoon, the slow train left one traveller at the station. He got out of a first-class carriage; he carried an umbrella and a travelling-bag; and he asked his way to the best inn. The station-master and the porter compared notes. One of them said: 'Evidently a gentleman.' The other added: 'What can he possibly want here?'

The stranger twice lost his way in the tortuous old streets of the town before he reached the inn. On giving his orders, it appeared that he wanted three things: a private room, something to eat, and, while the dinner was being cooked, materials for writing a letter.

Answering her daughter's questions downstairs, the landlady described her guest as a nice-looking man dressed in deep mourning.

'Young, my dear, with beautiful dark brown hair, and a grand beard, and a sweet sorrowful look. Ah, his eyes would tell anybody that his black clothes are not a mere sham. Whether married or single, of course I can't say. But I noticed the name on his travelling bag. A distinguished name, in my opinion—Hugh Mountjoy. I wonder what he'll order to drink when he has his dinner? What a mercy it will be if we can get rid of another bottle of the sour French wine!'

The bell in the private room rang at that moment; and the landlady's daughter, it is needless to say, took the opportunity of forming her own opinion of Mr. Hugh Mountjoy.

She returned with a letter in her hand, consumed by a vain longing for the advantages of gentle birth. 'Ah, mother, if I was a young lady of the higher classes, I know whose wife I should like to be!' Not particularly interested in sentimental aspirations,

the landlady asked to see Mr. Mountjoy's letter. The messenger who delivered it was to wait for an answer. It was addressed to: 'Miss Henley, care of Clarence Vimpany, Esquire, Honeybuzzard.' Urged by an excited imagination, the daughter longed to see Miss Henley. The mother was at a loss to understand why Mr. Mountjoy should have troubled himself to write the letter at all. 'If he knows the young lady who is staying at the doctor's house,' she said, 'why doesn't he call on Miss Henley?' She handed the letter back to her daughter. 'There! let the ostler take it; he's got nothing to do.'

'No, mother. The ostler's dirty hands mustn't touch it—I'll take the letter myself. Perhaps I may see Miss Henley.' Such was the impression which Mr. Hugh Mountjoy had innocently produced on a sensitive young person, condemned by destiny to the barren sphere of action afforded by a country inn!

The landlady herself took the dinner upstairs—a first course of mutton chops and potatoes; cooked to a degree of imperfection only attained in an English kitchen. The sour French wine was still on the good woman's mind. 'What would you choose to drink, sir?' she asked. Mr. Mountjoy seemed to feel no interest in what he might have to drink. 'We have some French wine, sir.'

'Thank you, ma'am; that will do.'

When the bell rang again, and the time came to produce the second course of cheese and celery, the landlady allowed the waiter to take her place. Her experience of the farmers who frequented the inn, and who had in some few cases been induced to taste the wine, warned her to anticipate an outbreak of just anger from Mr. Mountjoy. He, like the others, would probably ask what she 'meant by poisoning him with such stuff as that?' On the return of the waiter, she put the question:

'Did the gentleman complain of the French wine?'

'He wants to see you about it, ma'am.'

The landlady turned pale. The expression of Mr. Mountjoy's indignation was evidently reserved for the mistress of the house. 'Did he swear,' she asked, 'when he tasted it?'

'Lord bless you, ma'am, no! Drank it out of a tumbler, and—if you will believe me—actually seemed to like it.'

The landlady recovered her colour. Gratitude to Providence for having sent a customer to the inn, who could drink sour wine without discovering it, was the uppermost feeling in her ample bosom as she entered the private room. Mr. Mountjoy justified her anticipations. He was simple enough—with his tumbler before him, and the wine as it were under his nose—to begin with an apology.

'I am sorry to trouble you, ma'am. May I ask where you got this wine?'

'The wine, sir, was one of my late husband's bad debts. It was all he could get from a Frenchman who owed him money.'

'It's worth money, ma'am.'

'Indeed, sir?'

'Yes, indeed. This is some of the finest and purest claret that I have tasted for many a long day past.'

An alarming suspicion disturbed the serenity of the landlady's mind. Was this extraordinary opinion of the wine sincere? Or was it Mr. Mountjoy's wicked design to entrap her into praising her claret, and then to imply that she was a cheat by declaring what he really thought of it? She took refuge in a cautious reply:

'You are the first gentleman, sir, who has not found fault with it.'

'In that case, perhaps you would like to get rid of the wine?' Mr. Mountjoy suggested.

The landlady was still cautious. 'Who will buy it of me, sir?'

'I will. How much do you charge for it by the bottle?'

It was, by this time, clear that he was not mischievous—only a little crazy. The worldly-wise hostess took advantage of that circumstance to double the price. Without hesitation, she said: 'Five shillings a bottle, sir.'

Often, too often, the irony of circumstances brings together, on this earthly scene, the opposite types of vice and virtue. A lying landlady and a guest incapable of deceit were looking at each other across a narrow table; equally unconscious of the immeasurable moral gulf that lay between them. Influenced by honourable feeling, innocent Hugh Mountjoy lashed the landlady's greed for money to the full-gallop of human cupidity.

'I don't think you are aware of the value of your wine,' he said. 'I have claret in my

cellar which is not so good as this, and which costs more than you have asked. It is only fair to offer you seven-and-sixpence a bottle.'

When an eccentric traveller is asked to pay a price, and deliberately raises that price against himself, where is the sensible woman —especially if she happens to be a widow conducting an unprofitable business—who would hesitate to improve the opportunity? The greedy landlady raised her terms.

'On reflection, sir, I think I ought to have ten shillings a bottle, if you please.'

'The wine may be worth it,' Mountjoy answered quietly; 'but it is more than I can afford to pay. No, ma'am; I will leave you to find some lover of good claret with a longer purse than mine.'

It was in this man's character, when he said No, to mean No. Mr. Mountjoy's hostess perceived that her crazy customer was not to be trifled with. She lowered her terms again with

the headlong hurry of terror. 'You shall have it, sir, at your own price,' said this entirely shameless and perfectly respectable woman.

The bargain having been closed under these circumstances, the landlady's daughter knocked at the door. 'I took your letter myself, sir,' she said modestly; 'and here is the answer.' (She had seen Miss Henley, and did not think much of her.) Mountjoy offered the expression of his thanks, in words never to be forgotten by a sensitive young person, and opened his letter. It was short enough to be read in a moment; but it was evidently a favourable reply. He took his hat in a hurry, and asked to be shown the way to Mr. Vimpany's house.

CHAPTER II

THE MAN SHE REFUSED

MOUNTJOY had decided on travelling to Honeybuzzard, as soon as he heard that Miss Henley was staying with strangers in that town. Having had no earlier opportunity of preparing her to see him, he had

considerately written to her from the inn, in preference to presenting himself unexpectedly at the doctor's house. How would she receive the devoted friend, whose proposal of marriage she had refused for the second time, when they had last met in London?

The doctor's place of residence, situated in a solitary by-street, commanded a view, not perhaps encouraging to a gentleman who followed the medical profession: it was a view of the churchyard. The door was opened by a woman-servant, who looked suspiciously at the stranger. Without waiting to be questioned, she said her master was out.

Mountjoy mentioned his name, and asked for Miss Henley.

The servant's manner altered at once for the better; she showed him into a small drawing-room, scantily and cheaply furnished. Some poorly-framed prints on the walls (a little out of place, perhaps, in a doctor's house)

represented portraits of famous actresses, who had been queens of the stage in the early part of the present century. The few books, too, collected on a little shelf above the chimney-piece, were in every case specimens of dramatic literature. 'Who reads these plays?' Mountjoy asked himself. 'And how did Iris find her way into this house?'

While he was thinking of her, Miss Henley entered the room.

Her face was pale and careworn; tears dimmed her eyes when Mountjoy advanced to meet her. In his presence, the horror of his brother's death by assassination shook Iris as it had not shaken her yet. Impulsively, she drew his head down to her, with the fond familiarity of a sister, and kissed his forehead. 'Oh, Hugh, I know how you and Arthur loved each other! No words of mine can say how I feel for you.'

'No words are wanted, my dear,' he

answered tenderly. 'Your sympathy speaks for itself.'

He led her to the sofa and seated himself by her side. 'Your father has shown me what you have written to him,' he resumed; 'your letter from Dublin and your second letter from this place. I know what you have so nobly risked and suffered in poor Arthur's interests. It will be some consolation to me if I can make a return—a very poor return, Iris—for all that Arthur's brother owes to the truest friend that ever man had. No,' he continued, gently interrupting the expression of her gratitude. 'Your father has not sent me here—but he knows that I have left London for the express purpose of seeing you, and he knows why. You have written to him dutifully and affectionately; you have pleaded for pardon and reconciliation, when he is to blame. Shall I venture to tell you how he answered me, when I asked if he had no faith

left in his own child? "Hugh," he said, "you are wasting words on a man whose mind is made up. I will trust my daughter when that Irish lord is laid in his grave—not before." That is a reflection on you, Iris, which I cannot permit, even when your father casts it. He is hard, he is unforgiving; but he must, and shall, be conquered yet. I mean to make him do you justice; I have come here with that purpose, and that purpose only, in view. May I speak to you of Lord Harry?'

'How can you doubt it?'

'My dear, this is a delicate subject for me to enter on.'

'And a shameful subject for Me!' Iris broke out bitterly. 'Hugh! you are an angel, by comparison with that man—how debased I must be to love him—how unworthy of your good opinion! Ask me anything you like; have no mercy on me. Oh,' she cried,

with reckless contempt for herself, 'why don't you beat me? I deserve it!'

Mountjoy was well enough acquainted with the natures of women to pass over that passionate outbreak, instead of fanning the flame in her by reasoning and remonstrance.

'Your father will not listen to the expression of feeling,' he continued; 'but it is possible to rouse his sense of justice by the expression of facts. Help me to speak to him more plainly of Lord Harry than you could speak in your letters. I want to know what has happened, from the time when events at Ardoon brought you and the young lord together again, to the time when you left him in Ireland after my brother's death. If I seem to expect too much of you, Iris, pray remember that I am speaking with a true regard for your interests.'

In those words, he made his generous

appeal to her. She proved herself to be worthy of it.

Stated briefly, the retrospect began with the mysterious anonymous letters which had been addressed to Sir Giles.

Lord Harry's explanation had been offered to Iris gratefully, but with some reserve, after she had told him who the stranger at the milestone really was. 'I entreat you to pardon me, if I shrink from entering into particulars,' he had said. 'Circumstances, at the time, amply justified me in the attempt to use the banker's political influence as a means of securing Arthur's safety. I knew enough of Sir Giles's mean nature to be careful in trusting him; but I did hope to try what my personal influence might do. If he had possessed a tenth part of your courage, Arthur might have been alive, and safe in England, at this moment. I can't say any more; I daren't

say any more; it maddens me when I think of it!' He abruptly changed the subject, and interested Iris by speaking of other and later events. His association with the Invincibles—inexcusably rash and wicked as he himself confessed it to be—had enabled him to penetrate, and for a time to defeat secretly the murderous designs of the brotherhood. His appearances, first at the farmhouse and afterwards at the ruin in the wood, were referable to changes in the plans of the assassins which had come to his knowledge. When Iris had met with him he was on the watch, believing that his friend would take the short way back through the wood, and well aware that his own life might pay the penalty if he succeeded in warning Arthur. After the terrible discovery of the murder (committed on the high road), and the escape of the miscreant who had been guilty of the crime, the parting of Lord Harry and Miss Henley

had been the next event. She had left him, on her return to England, and had refused to consent to any of the future meetings between them which he besought her to grant.

At this stage in the narrative, Mountjoy felt compelled to ask questions more searching than he had put to Iris yet. It was possible that she might be trusting her own impressions of Lord Harry, with the ill-placed confidence of a woman innocently self-deceived.

'Did he submit willingly to your leaving him?' Mountjoy said.

'Not at first,' she replied.

'Has he released you from that rash engagement, of some years since, which pledged you to marry him?'

'No.'

'Did he allude to the engagement, on this occasion?'

'He said he held to it as the one hope of his life.'

'And what did you say?'

'I implored him not to distress me.'

'Did you say nothing more positive than that?'

'I couldn't help thinking, Hugh, of all that he had tried to do to save Arthur. But I insisted on leaving him—and I have left him.'

'Do you remember what he said at parting?'

'He said, "While I live, I love you."'

As she repeated the words, there was an involuntary change to tenderness in her voice which was not lost on Mountjoy.

'I must be sure,' he said to her gravely, 'of what I tell your father when I go back to him. Can I declare, with a safe conscience, that you will never see Lord Harry again?'

'My mind is made up never to see him

again.' She had answered firmly so far. Her next words were spoken with hesitation, in tones that faltered. 'But I am sometimes afraid,' she said, 'that the decision may not rest with me.'

'What do you mean?'

'I would rather not tell you.'

'That is a strange answer, Iris.'

'I value your good opinion, Hugh; and I am afraid of losing it.'

'Nothing has ever altered my opinion of you,' he replied; 'and nothing ever will.'

She looked at him anxiously, with the closest attention. Little by little, the expression of doubt in her face disappeared; she knew how he loved her—she resolved to trust him.

'My friend,' she began abruptly, 'education has done nothing for me. Since I left Ireland, I have sunk (I don't know how or why) into a state of superstitious fear. Yes!

I believe in a fatality which is leading me back to Lord Harry, in spite of myself. Twice already, since I left home, I have met with him; and each time I have been the means of saving him—once at the milestone, and once at the ruin in the wood. If my father still accuses me of being in love with an adventurer, you can say with perfect truth that I am afraid of him. I *am* afraid of the third meeting. I have done my best to escape from that man; and step by step, as I think I am getting away, Destiny is taking me back to him. I may be on my way to him here, hidden in this wretched little town. Oh, don't despise me! Don't be ashamed of me!'

'My dear, I am interested—deeply interested in you. That there may be some such influence as Destiny in our poor mortal lives I dare not deny. But I don't agree with your conclusion. What Destiny is to do with you

and with me, neither you nor I can pretend to know beforehand. In the presence of that great mystery, humanity must submit to be ignorant. Wait, Iris—wait!'

She answered him with the simplicity of a docile child: 'I will do anything you tell me.'

Mountjoy was too fond of her to say more of Lord Harry, for that day. He was careful to lead the talk to a topic which might be trusted to provoke no agitating thoughts. Finding Iris to all appearance established in the doctor's house, he was naturally anxious to know something of the person who must have invited her—the doctor's wife.

CHAPTER III

THE REGISTERED PACKET

MOUNTJOY began by alluding to the second of Miss Henley's letters to her father, and to a passage in it which mentioned Mrs. Vimpany with expressions of the sincerest gratitude.

'I should like to know more,' he said, 'of a lady whose hospitality at home seems to equal her kindness as a fellow-traveller, Did you first meet with her on the railway?'

'She travelled by the same train to Dublin, with me and my maid, but not in the same carriage,' Iris answered; 'I was so fortunate as to meet with her on the voyage from Dublin to Holyhead. We had a rough

crossing; and Rhoda suffered so dreadfully from sea-sickness that she frightened me. The stewardess was attending to ladies who were calling for her in all directions; I really don't know what misfortune might not have happened, if Mrs. Vimpany had not come forward in the kindest manner, and offered help. She knew so wonderfully well what was to be done, that she astonished me. "I am the wife of a doctor," she said; "and I am only imitating what I have seen my husband do, when his assistance has been required, at sea, in weather like this." In her poor state of health, Rhoda was too much exhausted to go on by the train, when we got to Holyhead. She is the best of good girls, and I am fond of her, as you know. If I had been by myself, I dare say I should have sent for medical help. What do you think dear Mrs. Vimpany offered to do? "Your maid is only faint," she said. "Give her rest and some iced wine, and she will

be well enough to go on by the slow train. Don't be frightened about her; I will wait with you." And she did wait. Are there many strangers, Hugh, who are as unselfishly good to others as my chance-acquaintance in the steam-boat?'

'Very few, I am afraid.'

Mountjoy made that reply with some little embarrassment; conscious of a doubt of Mrs. Vimpany's disinterested kindness, which seemed to be unworthy of a just man.

Iris went on.

'Rhoda was sufficiently recovered,' she said, 'to travel by the next train, and there seemed to be no reason for feeling any more anxiety. But, after a time, the fatigue of the journey proved to be too much for her. The poor girl turned pale—and fainted. Mrs. Vimpany revived her, but, as it turned out, only for a while. She fell into another fainting fit; and my travelling-companion began

to look anxious. There was some difficulty in restoring Rhoda to her senses. In dread of another attack, I determined to stop at the next station. It looked such a poor place, when we got to it, that I hesitated. Mrs. Vimpany persuaded me to go on. The next station, she said, was *her* station. "Stop there," she suggested, "and let my husband look at the girl. I ought not perhaps to say it, but you will find no better medical man out of London." I took the good creature's advice gratefully. What else could I do?'

'What would you have done,' Mountjoy inquired, 'if Rhoda had been strong enough to get to the end of the journey?'

'I should have gone on to London, and taken refuge in a lodging—you were in town, as I believed, and my father might relent in time. As it was, I felt my lonely position keenly. To meet with kind people, like Mr. Vimpany and his wife, was a real blessing to

such a friendless creature as I am—to say nothing of the advantage to Rhoda, who is getting better every day. I should like you to see Mrs. Vimpany, if she is at home. She is a little formal and old-fashioned in her manner—but I am sure you will be pleased with her. Ah! you look round the room! They are poor, miserably poor for persons in their position, these worthy friends of mine. I have had the greatest difficulty in persuading them to let me contribute my share towards the household expenses. They only yielded when I threatened to go to the inn. You are looking very serious, Hugh. Is it possible that you see some objection to my staying in this house?'

The drawing-room door was softly opened, at the moment when Iris put that question. A lady appeared on the threshold. Seeing the stranger, she turned to Iris.

'I didn't know, dear Miss Henley, that you had a visitor. Pray pardon my intrusion.'

The voice was deep; the articulation was clear; the smile presented a certain modest dignity which gave it a value of its own. This was a woman who could make such a commonplace thing as an apology worth listening to. Iris stopped her as she was about to leave the room. 'I was just wishing for you,' she said. 'Let me introduce my old friend, Mr. Mountjoy. Hugh, this is the lady who has been so kind to me—Mrs. Vimpany.'

Hugh's impulse, under the circumstances, was to dispense with the formality of a bow, and to shake hands. Mrs. Vimpany met this friendly advance with a suavity of action not often seen in these days of movement without ceremony. She was a tall slim woman, of a certain age. Art had so cleverly improved her complexion that it almost looked like

nature. Her cheeks had lost the plumpness of youth, but her hair (thanks again perhaps to Art) showed no signs of turning grey. The expression of her large dark eyes—placed perhaps a little too near to her high aquiline nose—claimed admiration from any person who was so fortunate as to come within their range of view. Her hands, long, yellow, and pitiably thin, were used with a grace which checked to some extent their cruel betrayal of her age. Her dress had seen better days, but it was worn with an air which forbade it to look actually shabby. The faded lace that encircled her neck fell in scanty folds over her bosom. She sank into a chair by Hugh's side. 'It was a great pleasure to me, Mr. Mountjoy, to offer my poor services to Miss Henley; I can't tell you how happy her presence makes me in our little house.' The compliment was addressed to Iris with every advantage that smiles and tones could offer.

Oddly artificial as it undoubtedly was, Mrs. Vimpany's manner produced nevertheless an agreeable impression. Disposed to doubt her at first, Mountjoy found that she was winning her way to a favourable change in his opinion. She so far interested him, that he began to wonder what her early life might have been, when she was young and handsome. He looked again at the portraits of actresses on the walls, and the plays on the bookshelf—and then (when she was speaking to Iris) he stole a sly glance at the doctor's wife. Was it possible that this remarkable woman had once been an actress? He attempted to put the value of that guess to the test by means of a complimentary allusion to the prints.

'My memory as a play-goer doesn't extend over many years,' he began; 'but I can appreciate the historical interest of your beautiful prints.' Mrs. Vimpany bowed gracefully—and dumbly. Mountjoy tried again.

'One doesn't often see the famous actresses of past days,' he proceeded, 'so well represented on the walls of an English house.'

This time, he had spoken to better purpose. Mrs. Vimpany answered him in words.

'I have many pleasant associations with the theatre,' she said, 'first formed in the time of my girlhood.'

Mountjoy waited to hear something more. Nothing more was said. Perhaps this reticent lady disliked looking back through a long interval of years, or perhaps she had her reasons for leaving Mountjoy's guess at the truth still lost in doubt. In either case, she deliberately dropped the subject. Iris took it up. Sitting by the only table in the room, she was in a position which placed her exactly opposite to one of the prints—the magnificent portrait of Mrs. Siddons as The Tragic Muse.

'I wonder if Mrs. Siddons was really as

beautiful as that?' she said, pointing to the print. 'Sir Joshua Reynolds is reported to have sometimes flattered his sitters.'

Mrs. Vimpany's solemn self-possessed eyes suddenly brightened; the name of the great actress seemed to interest her. On the point, apparently, of speaking, she dropped the subject of Mrs. Siddons as she had dropped the subject of the theatre. Mountjoy was left to answer Iris.

'We are none of us old enough,' he reminded her, 'to decide whether Sir Joshua's brush has been guilty of flattery or not.' He turned to Mrs. Vimpany, and attempted to look into her life from a new point of view. 'When Miss Henley was so fortunate as to make your acquaintance,' he said, 'you were travelling in Ireland. Was it your first visit to that unhappy country?'

'I have been more than once in Ireland.'

Having again deliberately disappointed

Mountjoy, she was assisted in keeping clear of the subject of Ireland by a fortunate interruption. It was the hour of delivery by the afternoon-post. The servant came in with a small sealed packet, and a slip of printed paper in her hand.

'It's registered, ma'am,' the woman announced. 'The postman says you are to please sign this. And he seems to be in a hurry.'

She placed the packet and the slip of paper on the table, near the inkstand. Having signed the receipt, Mrs. Vimpany took up the packet, and examined the address. She instantly looked at Iris, and looked away again. 'Will you excuse me for a moment?' Saying this she left the room, without opening the packet.

The moment the door closed on her, Iris started up, and hurried to Mountjoy.

Oh, Hugh,' she said, 'I saw the address on

that packet when the servant put it on the table!'

'My dear, what is there to excite you in the address?'

'Don't speak so loud! She may be listening outside the door.'

Not only the words, but the tone in which they were spoken, amazed Mountjoy. 'Your friend, Mrs. Vimpany!' he exclaimed.

'Mrs. Vimpany was afraid to open the packet in our presence,' Iris went on: 'you must have seen that. The handwriting is familiar to me; I am certain of the person who wrote the address.'

'Well? And who is the person?'

She whispered in his ear:

'Lord Harry.'

CHAPTER IV

THE GAME: MOUNTJOY LOSES

SURPRISE silenced Hugh for the moment. Iris understood the look that he fixed on her, and answered it. 'I am quite sure,' she told him, 'of what I say.'

Mountjoy's well-balanced mind hesitated at rushing to a conclusion.

'I am sure you are convinced of what you tell me,' he said. 'But mistakes do sometimes happen in forming a judgment of handwriting.'

In the state of excitement that now possessed her, Iris was easily irritated; she was angry with Hugh for only supposing that she might have made a mistake. He had himself, as she reminded him, seen Lord Harry's handwriting in past days. Was it possible to be mistaken in those bold thickly-written characters, with some of the letters so quaintly formed? 'Oh, Hugh, I am miserable enough as it is,' she broke out; 'don't distract me by disputing what I know! Think of a woman so kind, so disinterested, so charming—the very opposite of a false creature—think of Mrs. Vimpany having deceived me!'

There was not the slightest reason, thus far, for placing that interpretation on what

had happened. Mountjoy gently, very gently, remonstrated.

'My dear, we really don't know yet that Mrs. Vimpany has been acting under Lord Harry's instructions. Wait a little before you suspect your fellow-traveller of offering her services for the purpose of deceiving you.'

Iris was angry with him again: 'Why did Mrs. Vimpany never tell me she knew Lord Harry? Isn't that suspicious?'

Mountjoy smiled. 'Let me put a question on my side,' he said. 'Did *you* tell Mrs. Vimpany you knew Lord Harry?' Iris made no reply; her face spoke for her. 'Well, then,' he urged, 'is *your* silence suspicious? I am far, mind, from saying that this may not be a very unpleasant discovery. Only let us be sure first that we are right.'

With most of a woman's merits, Miss Henley had many of a woman's faults. Still holding to her own conclusion, she asked how

they could expect to be sure of anything if they addressed their inquiries to a person who had already deceived them.

Mountjoy's inexhaustible indulgence still made allowances for her. 'When Mrs. Vimpany comes back,' he said, 'I will find an opportunity of mentioning Lord Harry's name. If she tells us that she knows him, there will be good reason in that one circumstance, as it seems to me, for continuing to trust her.'

'Suppose she shams ignorance,' Iris persisted, 'and looks as if she had never heard of his name before?'

'In that case, I shall own that I was wrong, and shall ask you to forgive me.'

The finer and better nature of Iris recovered its influence at these words. 'It is I who ought to beg pardon,' she said. 'Oh, I wish I could think before I speak; how insolent and ill-tempered I have been! But

suppose I turn out to be right, Hugh, what will you do then?'

'Then, my dear, it will be my duty to take you and your maid away from this house, and to tell your father what serious reasons there are——' He abruptly checked himself. Mrs. Vimpany had returned; she was in perfect possession of her lofty courtesy, sweetened by the modest dignity of her smile.

'I have left you, Miss Henley, in such good company,' she said, with a gracious inclination of her head in the direction of Mountjoy, 'that I need hardly repeat my apologies—unless, indeed, I am interrupting a confidential conversation.'

It was possible that Iris might have betrayed herself, when the doctor's wife had looked at her after examining the address on the packet. In this case Mrs. Vimpany's allusion to 'a confidential conversation' would

have operated as a warning to a person of experience in the by-ways of deceit. Mountjoy's utmost exertion of cunning was not capable of protecting him on such conditions as these. The opportunity of trying his proposed experiment with Lord Harry's name seemed to have presented itself already. He rashly seized on it.

'You have interrupted nothing that was confidential,' he hastened to assure Mrs. Vimpany. 'We have been speaking of a reckless young gentleman, who is an acquaintance of ours. If what I hear is true, he has already become public property; his adventures have found their way into some of the newspapers.'

Here, if Mrs. Vimpany had answered Hugh's expectations, she ought to have asked who the young gentleman was. She merely listened in polite silence.

With a woman's quickness of perception,

Iris saw that Mountjoy had not only pounced on his opportunity prematurely, but had spoken with a downright directness of allusion which must at once have put such a ready-witted person as Mrs. Vimpany on her guard. In trying to prevent him from pursuing his unfortunate experiment in social diplomacy, Iris innocently repeated Mountjoy's own mistake. She, too, seized her opportunity prematurely. That is to say, she was rash enough to change the subject.

'You were talking just now, Hugh, of our friend's adventures,' she said; 'I am afraid you will find yourself involved in an adventure of no very agreeable kind, if you engage a bed at the inn. I never saw a more wretched-looking place.'

It was one of Mrs. Vimpany's many merits that she seldom neglected an opportunity of setting her friends at their ease.

'No, no, dear Miss Henley,' she hastened

to say; 'the inn is really a more clean and comfortable place than you suppose. A hard bed and a scarcity of furniture are the worst evils which your friend has to fear. Do you know,' she continued, addressing herself to Mountjoy, 'that I was reminded of a friend of mine, when you spoke just now of the young gentleman whose adventures are in the newspapers. Is it possible that you referred to the brother of the present Earl of Norland? A handsome young Irishman—with whom I first became acquainted many years since. Am I right in supposing that you and Miss Henley know Lord Harry?' she asked.

What more than this could an unprejudiced mind require? Mrs. Vimpany had set herself right with a simplicity that defied suspicion. Iris looked at Mountjoy. He appeared to know when he was beaten. Having acknowledged that Lord Harry was the young gentleman of whom he and Miss

Henley had been speaking, he rose to take leave.

After what had passed, Iris felt the necessity of speaking privately to Hugh. The necessary excuse presented itself in the remote situation of the inn. 'You will never find your way back,' she said, 'through the labyrinth of crooked streets in this old town. Wait for me a minute, and I will be your guide.'

Mrs. Vimpany protested. 'My dear! let the servant show the way.'

Iris held gaily to her resolution, and ran away to her room. Mrs. Vimpany yielded with her best grace. Miss Henley's motive could hardly have been plainer to her, if Miss Henley had confessed it herself. 'What a charming girl!' the doctor's amiable wife said to Mountjoy, when they were alone. 'If I were a man, Miss Iris is just the young lady that I should fall in love with.' She looked

significantly at Mountjoy. Nothing came of it. She went on: 'Miss Henley must have had many opportunities of being married; but the right man has, I fear, not yet presented himself.' Once more her eloquent eyes consulted Mountjoy, and once more nothing came of it. Some women are easily discouraged. Impenetrable Mrs. Vimpany was one of the other women; she had not done with Mountjoy yet—she invited him to dinner on the next day.

'Our early hour is three o'clock,' she said modestly. 'Pray join us. I hope to have the pleasure of introducing my husband.'

Mountjoy had his reasons for wishing to see the husband. As he accepted the invitation, Miss Henley returned to accompany him to the inn.

Iris put the inevitable question to Hugh as soon as they were out of the doctor's house

—'What do you say of Mrs. Vimpany, now?'

'I say that she must have been once an actress,' Mountjoy answered; 'and that she carries her experience of the stage into private life.'

'What do you propose to do next?'

'I propose to wait and see Mrs. Vimpany's husband to-morrow.'

'Why?'

'Mrs. Vimpany, my dear, is too clever for me. If—observe, please, that I do her the justice of putting it in that way—if she is really Lord Harry's creature, employed to keep watch on you, and to inform him of your next place of residence in England, I own that she has completely deceived me. In that case it is just possible that the husband is not such a finished and perfect humbug as the wife. I may be able to see through *him*. I can but try.'

Iris sighed. 'I almost hope you may not succeed,' she said.

Mountjoy was puzzled and made no attempt to conceal it.

'I thought you only wanted to get at the truth,' he answered.

'My mind might be easier, perhaps, if I was left in doubt,' she suggested. 'A perverse way of thinking has set up my poor opinion against yours. But I am getting back to my better sense. I believe you were entirely right when you tried to prevent me from rushing to conclusions; it is more than likely that I have done Mrs. Vimpany an injustice. Oh, Hugh, I ought to keep a friend—I who have so few friends—when I have got one! And there is another feeling in me which I must not conceal from you. When I remember Lord Harry's noble conduct in trying to save poor Arthur, I cannot believe him capable of such hateful deceit as consenting to our separation,

and then having me secretly watched by a spy. What monstrous inconsistency! Can anybody believe it? Can anybody account for it?'

'I think I can account for it, Iris, if you will let me make the attempt. You are mistaken, to begin with.'

'How am I mistaken?'

'You shall see. There is no such creature as a perfectly consistent human being on the face of the earth—and, strange as it may seem to you, the human beings themselves are not aware of it. The reason for this curious state of things is not far to seek. How can people who are ignorant—as we see every day—of their own characters be capable of correctly estimating the characters of others? Even the influence of their religion fails to open their eyes to the truth. In the Prayer which is the most precious possession of Christendom their lips repeat the entreaty that they may

not be led into temptation—but their minds fail to draw the inference. If that pathetic petition means anything, it means that virtuous men and women are capable of becoming vicious men and women, if a powerful temptation puts them to the test. Every Sunday, devout members of the congregation in church—models of excellence in their own estimation, and in the estimation of their neighbours—declare that they have done those things which they ought not to have done, and that there is no health in them. Will you believe that they are encouraged by their Prayer-books to present this sad exposure of the frailty of their own admirable characters? How inconsistent—and yet how entirely true! Lord Harry, as you rightly say, behaved nobly in trying to save my dear lost brother. He ought, as you think, and as other people think, to be consistently noble, after that, in all his thoughts and actions, to the end of his life. Suppose that

temptation does try him—such temptation, Iris, as you innocently present—why doesn't he offer a superhuman resistance? You might as well ask, Why is he a mortal man? How inconsistent, how improbable, that he should have tendencies to evil in him, as well as tendencies to good! Ah, I see you don't like this. It would be infinitely more agreeable (wouldn't it?) if Lord Harry was one of the entirely consistent characters, which are sometimes presented in works of fiction. Our good English readers are charmed with the man, the woman, or the child, who is introduced to them by the kind novelist as a being without faults. Do they stop to consider whether this is a true picture of humanity? It would be a terrible day for the book, if they ever did that. But the book is in no danger. The readers would even fail to discover the falseness of the picture, if they were presented to themselves as perfect characters.

"We mustn't say so, but how wonderfully like us!" There would be the only impression produced. I am not trying to dishearten you; I want to encourage you to look at humanity from a wider and truer point of view. Do not be too readily depressed, if you find your faith shaken in a person whom you have hitherto believed to be good. That person has been led into temptation. Wait till time shows you that the evil influence is not everlasting, and that the good influence will inconsistently renew your faith, out of the very depths of your despair. Humanity, in general, is neither perfectly good nor perfectly wicked: take it as you find it. Is this a hard lesson to learn? Well! it's easy to do what other people do under similar circumstances. Listen to the unwelcome truth to-day, my dear; and forget it to-morrow.'

They parted at the door of the inn.

CHAPTER V

THE GAME: MOUNTJOY PLAYS A NEW CARD

MR. VIMPANY (of the College of Surgeons) was a burly man, heavily built from head to foot. His bold round eyes looked straight at his fellow-creatures with an expression of impudent good humour; his whiskers were bushy, his hands were big, his lips were thick, his legs were solid. Add to this a broad sunburnt face, and a grey coat with wide tails, a waistcoat with a check pattern, and leather riding-gaiters—and no stranger could have failed to mistake Mr. Vimpany for a farmer of the old school. He was proud of the false impression that he created. 'Nature built me to be a

farmer,' he used to say. 'But my poor foolish old mother was a lady by birth, and she insisted on her son being a professional man. I hadn't brains for the Law, or money for the Army, or morals for the Church. And here I am a country doctor—the one representative of slavery left in the nineteenth century. You may not believe me, but I never see a labourer at the plough that I don't envy him.'

This was the husband of the elegant lady with the elaborate manners. This was the man who received Mountjoy with a 'Glad to see you, sir,' and a shake of the hand that hurt him.

'Coarse fare,' said Mr. Vimpany, carving a big joint of beef; 'but I can't afford anything better. Only a pudding to follow, and a glass of glorious old sherry. Miss Henley is good enough to excuse it—and my wife's used to it—and you will put up with it,

Mr. Mountjoy, if you are half as amiable as you look. I'm an old-fashioned man. The pleasure of a glass of wine with you, sir.'

Hugh's first experience of the 'glorious old sherry' led him to a discovery, which proved to be more important than he was disposed to consider it at the moment. He merely observed, with some amusement, that Mr. Vimpany smacked his lips in hearty approval of the worst sherry that his guest had ever tasted. Here, plainly self-betrayed, was a medical man who was an exception to a general rule in the profession—here was a doctor ignorant of the difference between good wine and bad!

Both the ladies were anxious to know how Mountjoy had passed the night at the inn. He had only time to say that there was nothing to complain of, when Mr. Vimpany burst into an explosion of laughter.

'Oh, but you must have had something to

complain of!' said the big doctor. 'I would bet a hundred, if I could afford it, that the landlady tried to poison you with her sour French wine.'

'Do you speak of the claret at the inn, after having tasted it?' Mountjoy asked.

'What do you take me for?' cried Mr. Vimpany. 'After all I have heard of that claret, I am not fool enough to try it myself, I can tell you.' Mountjoy received this answer in silence. The doctor's ignorance and the doctor's prejudice, in the matter of wine, had started a new train of thought in Hugh's mind, which threatened serious consequences to Mr. Vimpany himself. There was a pause at the table; nobody spoke. The doctor saw condemnation of his rudeness expressed in his wife's face. He made a rough apology to Mountjoy, who was still preoccupied. 'No offence, I hope? It's in the nature of me, sir, to speak my mind. If I

could fawn and flatter, I should have got on better in my profession. I'm what they call a rough diamond. No offence, I say?'

'None whatever, Mr. Vimpany.'

'That's right! Try another glass of sherry.'

Mountjoy took the sherry.

Iris looked at him, lost in surprise. It was unlike Hugh to be interested in a stranger's opinion of wine. It was unlike him to drink wine which was evidently not to his taste. And it was especially unlike his customary courtesy to let himself fall into thought at dinner-time, when there were other persons at the table. Was he ill? Impossible to look at him, and not see that he was in perfect health. What did it mean?

Finding Mountjoy inattentive, Mr. Vimpany addressed himself to Iris.

'I had to ride hard, Miss Henley, to get home in time for dinner. There are patients,

I must tell you, who send for the doctor, and then seem to think they know more about it than the very man whom they have called in to cure them. It isn't he who tells them what their illness is; it's they who tell him. They dispute about the medical treatment that's best for them, and the one thing they are never tired of doing is talking about their symptoms. It was an old man's gabble that kept me late to-day. However, the Squire, as they call him in these parts, is a patient with a long purse; I am obliged to submit.'

'A gentleman of the old school, dear Miss Henley,' Mrs. Vimpany explained. 'Immensely rich. Is he better?' she asked, turning to her husband.

'Better?' cried the outspoken doctor. 'Pooh! there's nothing the matter with him but gluttony. He went to London, and consulted a great man, a humbug with a handle to his name. The famous physician got rid

of him in no time—sent him abroad to boil himself in foreign baths. He came home again worse than ever, and consulted poor Me. I found him at dinner—a perfect feast, I give you my word of honour!—and the old fool gorging himself till he was black in the face. His wine, I should have said, was not up to the mark; wanted body and flavour, you know. Ah, Mr. Mountjoy, this seems to interest you; reminds you of the landlady's wine—eh? Well, sir, how do you think I treated the Squire? Emptied his infirm old inside with an emetic—and there he was on his legs again! Whenever he overeats himself, he sends for me; and pays liberally. I ought to be grateful to him, and I am. Upon my soul, I believe I should be in the bankruptcy court but for the Squire's stomach. Look at my wife! She's shocked at me. We ought to keep up appearances, my dear? Not I! When I am poor, I say I am poor.

When I cure a patient, I make no mystery of it; everybody's welcome to know how it's done. Don't be down-hearted, Arabella; nature never meant your husband for a doctor, and there's the long and the short of it. Another glass of sherry, Mr. Mountjoy?'

All social ceremonies—including the curious English custom which sends the ladies upstairs, after dinner, and leaves the gentlemen at the table—found a devoted adherent in Mrs. Vimpany. She rose as if she had been presiding at a banquet, and led Miss Henley affectionately to the drawing-room. Iris glanced at Hugh. No: his mind was not at ease yet; the preoccupied look had not left his face.

Jovial Mr. Vimpany pushed the bottle across the table to his guest, and held out a handful of big black cigars.

'Now for the juice of the grape,' he cried, 'and the best cigar in all England!'

He had just filled his glass, and struck a light for his cigar, when the servant came in with a note. Some men relieve their sense of indignation in one way, and some in another. The doctor's form of relief was an oath. 'Talk about slavery!' he shouted. 'Find me such a slave in all Africa as a man in my profession. There isn't an hour of the day or night that he can call his own. Here's a stupid old woman with an asthma, who has got another spasmodic attack—and I must leave my dinner-table and my friend, just as we are enjoying ourselves. I have half a mind not to go.'

The inattentive guest suddenly set himself right in his host's estimation. Hugh remonstrated with an appearance of interest in the case, which the doctor interpreted as a compliment to himself: 'Oh, Mr. Vimpany, humanity! humanity!'

'Oh, Mr. Mountjoy, money! money!' the

facetious doctor answered. 'The old lady is our Mayor's mother, sir. You don't seem to be quick at taking a joke. Make your mind easy; I shall pocket my fee.'

As soon as he had closed the door, Hugh Mountjoy uttered a devout ejaculation. 'Thank God!' he said—and walked up and down the room, free to think without interruption at last.

The subject of his meditations was the influence of intoxication, in disclosing the hidden weaknesses and vices of a man's character by exhibiting them just as they are, released from the restraint which he exercises over himself when he is sober. That there was a weak side, and probably a vicious side, in Mr. Vimpany's nature it was hardly possible to doubt. His blustering good humour, his audacious self-conceit, the tones of his voice, the expression in his eyes, all revealed him (to use one expressive word) as a humbug.

Let drink subtly deprive him of his capacity for self-concealment, and the true nature of his wife's association with Lord Harry might sooner or later show itself—say, in after-dinner talk, under skilful management. The right method of entrapping him into a state of intoxication (which might have presented serious difficulties under other circumstances) was suggested, partly by his ignorance of the difference between good wine and bad, and partly by Mountjoy's knowledge of the excellent quality of the landlady's claret. He had recognised, as soon as he tasted it, that finest vintage of Bordeaux, which conceals its true strength—to a gross and ignorant taste—under the exquisite delicacy of its flavour. Encourage Mr. Vimpany, by means of a dinner at the inn, to give his opinion as a man whose judgment in claret was to be seriously consulted—and permit him also to discover that Hugh was rich enough to have been able to

buy the wine—and the attainment of the end in view would be simply a question of time. There was certainly the chance to be reckoned with, that his thick head might prove to be too strong for the success of the experiment. Mountjoy determined to try it, and did try it nevertheless.

Mr. Vimpany returned from his medical errand, thoroughly well satisfied with himself.

'The Mayor's mother has reason to thank you, sir,' he announced. 'If you hadn't hurried me away, the wretched old creature would have been choked. A regular stand-up fight, by Jupiter, between death and the doctor!—and the doctor has won! Give me the reward of merit. Pass the bottle.'

He took up the decanter, and looked at it.

'Why, what have you been about?' he asked. 'I made up my mind that I should want the key of the cellar when I came back,

and I don't believe you have drunk a drop in my absence. What does it mean?'

'It means that I am not worthy of your sherry,' Mountjoy answered. 'The Spanish wines are too strong for my weak digestion.'

Mr. Vimpany burst into one of his explosions of laughter. 'You miss the landlady's vinegar—eh?'

'Yes, I do! Wait a minute, doctor; I have a word to say on my side—and, like you, I mean what I say. The landlady's vinegar is some of the finest Château Margaux I have ever met with—thrown away on ignorant people who are quite unworthy of it.'

The doctor's natural insolence showed itself. 'You have bought this wonderful wine, of course?' he said satirically.

'That,' Mountjoy answered, 'is just what I have done.'

For once in his life, Mr. Vimpany's self-sufficient readiness of speech failed him. He

stared at his guest in dumb amazement. On this occasion, Mountjoy improved the opportunity to good purpose. Mr. Vimpany accepted with the utmost readiness an invitation to dine, on the next day, at the inn. But he made a condition. 'In case I don't agree with you about that Château—what-you-call-it,' he said, 'you won't mind my sending home for a bottle of sherry?'

The next event of the day was a visit to the most interesting monument of antiquity in the town. In the absence of the doctor, caused by professional engagements, Miss Henley took Mountjoy to see the old church —and Mrs. Vimpany accompanied them, as a mark of respect to Miss Henley's friend.

When there was a chance of being able to speak confidentially, Iris was eager in praising the doctor's wife. 'You can't imagine, Hugh, how agreeable she has been, and how entirely she has convinced me that I was wrong,

shamefully wrong, in thinking of her as I did. She sees that you dislike her, and yet she speaks so nicely of you. "Your clever friend enjoys your society," she said; "pray accompany me when I take him to see the church." How unselfish!'

Mountjoy kept his own counsel. The generous impulses which sometimes led Iris astray were, as he well knew, beyond the reach of remonstrance. His own opinion of Mrs. Vimpany still pronounced steadily against her. Prepared for discoveries, on the next day, which might prove too serious to be trifled with, he now did his best to provide for future emergencies.

After first satisfying himself that there was nothing in the present state of the maid's health which need detain her mistress at Honeybuzzard, he next completed his preparations by returning to the inn, and writing to Mr. Henley. With strict regard to truth,

his letter presented the daughter's claim on the father under a new point of view. Whatever the end of it might be, Mr. Henley was requested to communicate his intentions by telegraph. 'Will you receive Iris?' was the question submitted. The answer expected was: 'Yes' or 'No.'

CHAPTER VI

THE GAME: MOUNTJOY WINS

MR. HENLEY'S telegram arrived at the inn the next morning.

He was willing to receive his daughter, but not unreservedly. The message was characteristic of the man: 'Yes—on trial.' Mountjoy was not shocked, was not even surprised. He knew that the successful speculations, by means of which Mr. Henley had accumulated his wealth, had raised against him enemies, who had spread scandalous reports which had never been completely refuted. The silent secession of friends, in whose fidelity he trusted, had hardened the man's heart and embittered his nature. Strangers

in distress, who appealed to the rich retired merchant for help, found in their excellent references to character the worst form of persuasion that they could have adopted. Paupers without a rag of reputation left to cover them, were the objects of charity whom Mr. Henley relieved. When he was asked to justify his conduct, he said: 'I have a sympathy with bad characters—I am one of them myself.'

With the arrival of the dinner-hour the doctor appeared, in no very amiable humour, at the inn.

'Another hard day's work,' he said; 'I should sink under it, if I hadn't a prospect of getting rid of my practice here. London—or the neighbourhood of London — there's the right place for a man like Me. Well? Where's the wonderful wine? Mind! I'm Tom-Tell-Truth; if I don't like your French tipple, I shall say so.'

The inn possessed no claret glasses; they drank the grand wine in tumblers as if it had been vin ordinaire.

Mr. Vimpany showed that he was acquainted with the formalities proper to the ceremony of tasting. He filled his makeshift glass, he held it up to the light, and looked at the wine severely; he moved the tumbler to and fro under his nose, and smelt at it again and again; he paused and reflected; he tasted the claret as cautiously as if he feared it might be poisoned; he smacked his lips, and emptied his glass at a draught; lastly, he showed some consideration for his host's anxiety, and pronounced sentence on the wine.

'Not so good as you think it, sir. But nice light claret; clean and wholesome. I hope you haven't given too much for it?'

Thus far, Hugh had played a losing game patiently. His reward had come at last.

After what the doctor had just said to him, he saw the winning card safe in his own hand.

The bad dinner was soon over. No soup, of course; fish, in the state of preservation usually presented by a decayed country town; steak that rivalled the toughness of india-rubber; potatoes whose aspect said, 'Stranger, don't eat us'; pudding that would have produced a sense of discouragement, even in the mind of a child; and the famous English cheese which comes to us, oddly enough, from the United States, and stings us vindictively when we put it into our mouths. But the wine, the glorious wine, would have made amends to anybody but Mr. Vimpany for the woeful deficiencies of the food. Tumbler-full after tumbler-full of that noble vintage poured down his thirsty and ignorant throat; and still he persisted in declaring that it was nice light stuff, and still he un-

forgivingly bore in mind the badness of the dinner.

'The feeding here,' said this candid man, 'is worse if possible than the feeding at sea, when I served as doctor on board a passenger-steamer. Shall I tell you how I lost my place? Oh, say so plainly, if you don't think my little anecdote worth listening to!'

'My dear sir, I am waiting to hear it.'

'Very good. No offence, I hope? That's right! Well, sir, the captain of the ship complained of me to the owners; I wouldn't go round, every morning, and knock at the ladies' cabin-doors, and ask how they felt after a sea-sick night. Who doesn't know what they feel without knocking at their doors? Let them send for the doctor when they want him. That was how I understood my duty, and there was the line of conduct that lost me my place. Pass the wine. Talking of ladies, what do you think of my wife?

Did you ever see such distinguished manners before? My dear fellow, I have taken a fancy to you. Shake hands. I'll tell you another little anecdote. Where do you think my wife picked up her fashionable airs and graces? Ho! ho! On the stage! The highest branch of the profession, sir—a tragic actress. If you had seen her in Lady Macbeth, Mrs. Vimpany would have made your flesh creep. Look at me, and feast your eyes on a man who is above hypocritical objections to the theatre. Haven't I proved it by marrying an actress? But we don't mention it here. The savages in this beastly place wouldn't employ me, if they knew I had married a stage-player. Hullo! the bottle's empty again. Ha! here's another bottle, full. I love a man who has always got a full bottle to offer his friend. Shake hands. I say, Mountjoy, tell me on your sacred word of honour, can you keep a secret? My wife's

secret, sir! Stop! let me look at you again. I thought I saw you smile. If a man smiles at me, when I am opening my whole heart to him, by the living jingo, I would knock that man down at his own table! What? you didn't smile? I apologise. Your hand again; I drink your health in your own good wine. Where was I? What was I talking about?'

Mountjoy carefully humoured his interesting guest.

'You were about to honour me,' he said, 'by taking me into your confidence.' Mr. Vimpany stared in tipsy bewilderment. Mountjoy tried again, in plainer language: 'You were going to tell me a secret.'

This time the doctor grasped the idea. He looked round cunningly to the door. 'Any eavesdroppers?' he asked. 'Hush! Whisper—this is serious—whisper! What was it I was going to tell you? What was the secret, old boy?'

Mountjoy answered a little too readily: 'I think it related to Mrs. Vimpany.'

Mrs. Vimpany's husband threw himself back in his chair, snatched a dirty handkerchief out of his pocket, and began to cry.

'Here's a false friend!' the creature whimpered. 'Asks me to dinner, and takes advantage of my dependent situation to insult my wife. The loveliest of women, the sweetest of women, the innocentest of women. Oh, my wife! my wife!' He suddenly threw his handkerchief to the other end of the room, and burst out laughing. 'Ho! ho! Mountjoy, what an infernal fool you must be to take me seriously. I can act, too. Do you think I care about my wife? She was a fine woman once; she's a bundle of old rags now. But she has her merits. Hush! I want to know something. Have you got a lord among your circle of acquaintance.'

Experience made Mountjoy more careful;

perhaps a little too careful. He only said 'Yes.'

The doctor's dignity asserted itself. 'That's a short answer, sir, to a man in my position. If you want me to believe you, mention your friend's name.'

Here was a chance at last! 'His name,' Mountjoy began, 'is Lord Harry——'

Mr. Vimpany lost his dignity in an instant. He struck his heavy fist on the table, with a blow that made the tumblers jump.

'Coincidence!' he cried. 'How wonderful—no; that's not the word—providential is the word—how providential are coincidences! I mean, of course, to a rightly constituted mind. Let nobody contradict me! When I say a rightly constituted mind, I speak seriously; and a young man like you will be all the better for it. Mountjoy! dear Mountjoy! jolly Mountjoy! my wife's lord is *your* lord—Lord Harry. No; none of your non-

sense—I won't have any more wine. Yes, I will! It might hurt your feelings if I didn't drink with you. Pass the bottle. Ha! That's a nice ring you've got on your finger. Perhaps you think it valuable? It's nothing, sir; it's dross, it's dirt, compared to my wife's diamond pin! There's a jewel, if you like! It will be worth a fortune to us when we sell it. A gift, dear sir. I'm afraid I've been too familiar with you. Speaking as a born gentleman, I beg to present my respects, and I call you "dear sir." Did I tell you the diamond pin was a gift? It's nothing of the sort; we are under no obligation; my wife, my admirable wife, has earned that diamond pin. By registered post; and what I call a manly letter from Lord Harry. He is deeply obliged (I give you the sense of it) by what my wife has done for him; ready-money is scarce with my lord; he sends a family jewel, with his love. Oh, I'm not jealous. He's

welcome to love Mrs. Vimpany, in her old age, if he likes. Did you say that, sir? Did you say that Lord Harry, or any man, was welcome to love Mrs. Vimpany? I have a great mind to throw this bottle at your head. No, I won't; it's wasting good wine. How kind of you to give me good wine! Who are you? I don't like dining with a stranger. Do you know any friend of mine? Do you know a man named Mountjoy? Do you know two men named Mountjoy? No: you don't. One of them is dead; killed by those murdering scoundrels—what do you call them? Eh, what?' The doctor's voice began to falter, his head dropped; he slumbered suddenly and woke suddenly, and began talking again suddenly. 'Would you like to be made acquainted with Lord Harry? I'll give you a sketch of his character before I introduce him. Between ourselves, he's a desperate wretch. Do you know why he employed my

wife, my admirable wife? You will agree with me; he ought to have looked after his young woman himself. We've got his young woman safe in our house. A nice girl. Not my style; my medical knowledge certifies she's cold-blooded. Lord Harry has only to come over here, and find her. Why the devil doesn't he come? What is it keeps him in Ireland? Do you know? I seem to have forgotten. My own belief is I've got softening of the brain. What's good for softening of the brain? There isn't a doctor living who won't tell you the right remedy—wine. Pass the wine. If this claret is worth a farthing, it's worth a guinea a bottle. I ask you in confidence; did you ever hear of such a fool as my wife's lord? His name escapes me. No matter; he stops in Ireland—hunting. Hunting what? The fox? Nothing so noble; hunting assassins. He's got some grudge against one of them. Means to kill

one of them. A word in your ear; they'll kill *him*. Do you ever bet? Five to one, he's a dead man before the end of the week. When is the end of the week? Tuesday, Wednesday—no, Saturday—that's the beginning of the week—no, it isn't—the beginning of the week isn't the Sabbath—Sunday, of course—we are not Christians, we are Jews—I mean we are Jews, we are not Christians—I mean——'

The claret got the better of his tongue at last. He mumbled and muttered; he sank back in his chair; he chuckled; he hiccupped; he fell asleep.

All and more than all that Mountjoy feared, he had now discovered. In a state of sobriety, the doctor was probably one of those men who are always ready to lie. In a state of intoxication, the utterances of his drunken delirium might unconsciously betray the truth. The reason which he had given for

Lord Harry's continued absence in Ireland could not be wisely rejected as unworthy of belief. It was in the reckless nature of the wild lord to put his own life in peril, in the hope of revenging Arthur Mountjoy on the wretch who had killed him. Taking this bad news for granted, was there any need to distress Iris by communicating the motive which detained Lord Harry in his own country? Surely not!

And, again, was there any immediate advantage to be gained by revealing the true character of Mrs. Vimpany, as a spy, and worse still a spy who was paid? In her present state of feeling Iris would, in all probability, refuse to believe it.

Arriving at these conclusions, Hugh looked at the doctor snoring and choking in an easy-chair. He had not wasted the time and patience, devoted to the stratagem which had now successfully reached its end. After what

he had just heard—thanks to the claret—he could not hesitate to accomplish the speedy removal of Iris from Mr. Vimpany's house; using her father's telegram as the only means of persuasion on which it was possible to rely. Mountjoy left the inn without ceremony, and hurried away to Iris in the hope of inducing her to return to London with him that night.

CHAPTER VII

DOCTORING THE DOCTOR

ASKING for Miss Henley at the doctor's door, Hugh was informed that she had gone out, with her invalid maid, for a walk. She had left word if Mr. Mountjoy called in her absence, to beg that he would kindly wait for her return.

On his way up to the drawing-room, Mountjoy heard Mrs. Vimpany's sonorous

voice occupied, as he supposed, in reading aloud. The door being opened for him, he surprised her, striding up and down the room with a book in her hand; grandly declaiming without anybody to applaud her. After what Hugh had already heard, he could only conclude that reminiscences of her theatrical career had tempted the solitary actress to make a private appearance, for her own pleasure, in one of those tragic characters to which her husband had alluded. She recovered her self-possession on Mountjoy's appearance, with the ease of a mistress of her art. 'Pardon me,' she said, holding up her book with one hand, and tapping it indicatively with the other; 'Shakespeare carries me out of myself. A spark of the poet's fire burns in the poet's humble servant. May I hope that I have made myself understood? You look as if you had a fellow-feeling for me.'

Mountjoy did his best to fill the sympathetic part assigned to him, and only succeeded in showing what a bad actor he would have been, if he had gone on the stage. Under the sedative influence thus administered, Mrs. Vimpany put away her book, and descended at once from the highest poetry to the lowest prose.

'Let us return to domestic events,' she said indulgently. 'Have the people at the inn given you a good dinner?'

'The people did their best,' Mountjoy answered cautiously.

'Has my husband returned with you?' Mrs. Vimpany went on.

Mountjoy began to regret that he had not waited for Iris in the street. He was obliged to acknowledge that the doctor had not returned with him.

'Where is Mr. Vimpany?'

'At the inn.'

'What is he doing there?'

Mountjoy hesitated. Mrs. Vimpany rose again into the regions of tragic poetry. She stepped up to him, as if he had been Macbeth, and she was ready to use the daggers. 'I understand but too well,' she declared, in terrible tones. 'My wretched husband's vices are known to me. Mr. Vimpany is intoxicated.'

Hugh tried to make the best of it. 'Only asleep,' he said. Mrs. Vimpany looked at him once more. This time, it was Queen Katharine looking at Cardinal Wolsey. She bowed with lofty courtesy, and opened the door. 'I have occasion,' she said, 'to go out'——and made an exit.

Five minutes later, Mountjoy (standing at the window, impatiently on the watch for the return of Iris) saw Mrs. Vimpany in the street. She entered a chemist's shop, on the opposite side of the way, and came out again with a

bottle in her hand. It was enclosed in the customary medical wrapping of white paper. Majestically, she passed out of sight. If Hugh had followed her, he would have traced the doctor's wife to the door of the inn.

The unemployed waiter was on the house-steps, looking about him—with nothing to see. He made his bow to Mrs. Vimpany, and informed her that the landlady had gone out.

'You will do as well,' was the reply. 'Is Mr. Vimpany here?'

The waiter smiled, and led the way through the passage to the foot of the stairs. 'You can hear him, ma'am.' It was quite true; Mr. Vimpany's snoring answered for Mr. Vimpany. His wife ascended the first two or three stairs, and stopped to speak again to the waiter. She asked what the two gentlemen had taken to drink with their dinner. They had taken 'the French wine.'

'And nothing else?'

The waiter ventured on a little joke. 'Nothing else,' he said—'and more than enough of it, too.'

'Not more than enough, I suppose, for the good of the house,' Mrs. Vimpany remarked.

'I beg your pardon, ma'am; the claret the two gentlemen drank is not charged for in the bill.'

'What do you mean?'

The waiter explained that Mr. Mountjoy had purchased the whole stock of the wine. Suspicion, as well as surprise, appeared in Mrs. Vimpany's face. She had hitherto thought it likely that Miss Henley's gentleman-like friend might be secretly in love with the young lady. Her doubts of him, now, took a wider range of distrust. She went on up the stairs by herself, and banged the door of the private room as the easiest means of waking the sleeping man. To the utmost noise that

she could make in this way, he was perfectly impenetrable. For a while she waited, looking at him across the table with unutterable contempt.

There was the man to whom the religion of the land and the law of the land, acting together in perfect harmony, had fettered her for life! Some women, in her position, might have wasted time in useless self-reproach. Mrs. Vimpany reviewed her miserable married life with the finest mockery of her own misfortune. 'Virtue,' she said to herself, 'is its own reward.'

Glancing with careless curiosity at the disorder of the dinner-table, she noticed some wine still left in the bottom of her husband's glass. Had artificial means been used to reduce him to his present condition? She tasted the claret. No: there was nothing in the flavour of it which betrayed that he had been drugged. If the waiter was to be

believed, he had only drunk claret—and there he was, in a state of helpless stupefaction, nevertheless.

She looked again at the dinner-table, and discovered one among the many empty bottles, with some wine still left in it. After a moment of reflection, she took a clean tumbler from the sideboard.

Here was the wine which had been an object of derision to Mr. Vimpany and his friends. They were gross feeders and drinkers; and it might not be amiss to put their opinions to the test. She was not searching for the taste of a drug now; her present experiment proposed to try the wine on its own merits.

At the time of her triumphs on the country stage—before the date of her unlucky marriage—rich admirers had entertained the handsome actress at suppers, which offered every luxury that the most perfect

table could supply. Experience had made her acquainted with the flavour of the finest claret—and that experience was renewed by the claret which she was now tasting. It was easy to understand why Mr. Mountjoy had purchased the wine; and, after a little thinking, his motive for inviting Mr. Vimpany to dinner seemed to be equally plain. Foiled in their first attempt at discovery by her own prudence and tact, his suspicions had set their trap. Her gross husband had been tempted to drink, and to talk at random (for Mr. Mountjoy's benefit) in a state of intoxication!

What secrets might the helpless wretch not have betrayed, before the wine had completely stupefied him?

Urged by rage and fear, she shook him furiously. He woke; he glared at her with bloodshot eyes; he threatened her with his clenched fist. There was but one way of lifting his purblind stupidity to the light. She

appealed to his experience of himself, on many a former occasion: 'You fool, you have been drinking again—and there's a patient waiting for you.' To that dilemma he was accustomed; the statement of it partially roused him. Mrs. Vimpany tore off the paper wrapping, and opened the medicine-bottle which she had brought with her.

He stared at it; he muttered to himself: 'Is she going to poison me?' She seized his head with one hand, and held the open bottle to his nose. 'Your own prescription,' she cried, 'for yourself and your hateful friends.'

His nose told him what words might have tried vainly to say; he swallowed the mixture. 'If I lose the patient,' he muttered oracularly, 'I lose the money.' His resolute wife dragged him out of his chair. The second door in the dining-room led into an empty bed-chamber. With her help, he got into the room, and dropped on the bed.

Mrs. Vimpany consulted her watch.

On many a former occasion she had learnt what interval of repose was required, before the sobering influence of the mixture could successfully assert itself. For the present, she had only to return to the other room. The waiter presented himself, asking if there was anything he could do for her. Familiar with the defective side of her husband's character, he understood what it meant when she pointed to the bedroom door. 'The old story, ma'am,' he said, with an air of respectful sympathy. 'Can I get you a cup of tea?'

Mrs. Vimpany accepted the tea, and enjoyed it thoughtfully.

She had two objects in view—to be revenged on Mountjoy, and to find a way of forcing him to leave the town before he could communicate his discoveries to Iris. How to reach these separate ends, by one and the same means, was still the problem which she

was trying to solve, when the doctor's coarse voice was audible calling for somebody to come to him.

If his head was only clear enough, by this time, to understand the questions which she meant to put, his answers might suggest the idea of which she was in search. Rising with alacrity, Mrs. Vimpany returned to the bed-chamber.

'You miserable creature,' she began, 'are you sober now?'

'I'm as sober as you are.'

'Do you know,' she went on, 'why Mr. Mountjoy asked you to dine with him?'

'Because he's my friend.'

'He is your worst enemy. Hold your tongue! I'll explain what I mean directly. Rouse your memory, if you have got a memory left. I want to know what you and Mr. Mountjoy talked about, after dinner.'

He stared at her helplessly. She tried to

find her way to his recollection by making suggestive inquiries. It was useless; he only complained of being thirsty. His wife lost her self-control. She was too furiously angry with him to be able to remain in the room. Recovering her composure when she was alone, she sent for soda-water and brandy. Her one chance of making him useful was to humour his vile temper; she waited on him herself.

In some degree the drink cleared his muddled head. Mrs. Vimpany tried his memory once more. Had he said this? Had he said that? Yes: he thought it likely. Had he, or had Mr. Mountjoy, mentioned Lord Harry's name? A glimmer of intelligence showed itself in his stupid eyes. Yes —and they had quarrelled about it: he rather thought he had thrown a bottle at Mr. Mountjoy's head. Had they, either of them, said anything about Miss Henley? Oh, of

course! What was it? He was unable to remember. Had his wife done bothering him, now?

'Not quite,' she replied. 'Try to understand what I am going to say to you. If Lord Harry comes to us, while Miss Henley is in our house——'

He interrupted her: 'That's your business.'

'Wait a little. It's my business, if I hear beforehand that his lordship is coming. But he is quite reckless enough to take us by surprise. In that case, I want you to make yourself useful. If you happen to be at home, keep him from seeing Miss Henley, until I have seen her first.'

'Why?'

'I want an opportunity, my dear, of telling Miss Henley that I have been wicked enough to deceive her, before she finds it out for herself. I may hope she will forgive me, if I confess everything.'

The doctor laughed: 'What the devil does it matter whether she forgives you or not?'

'It matters a great deal.'

'Why, you talk as if you were fond of her!'

'I am.'

The doctor's clouded intelligence was beginning to clear; he made a smart reply: 'Fond of her, and deceiving her—aha!'

'Yes,' she said quietly, 'that's just what it is. It has grown on me, little by little; I can't help liking Miss Henley.'

'Well,' Mr. Vimpany remarked, 'you *are* a fool!' He looked at her cunningly. 'Suppose I do make myself useful, what am I to gain by it?'

'Let us get back,' she suggested, 'to the gentleman who invited you to dinner, and made you tipsy for his own purposes.'

'I'll break every bone in his skin!'

'Don't talk nonsense! Leave Mr. Mountjoy to me.'

'Do *you* take his part? I can tell you this. If I drank too much of that poisonous French stuff, Mountjoy set me the example. He was tipsy—as you call it—shamefully tipsy, I give you my word of honour. What's the matter now?'

His wife (so impenetrably cool, thus far) had suddenly become excited. There was not the smallest fragment of truth in what he had just said of Hugh, and Mrs. Vimpany was not for a moment deceived by it. But the lie had, accidentally, one merit—it suggested to her the idea which she had vainly tried to find, over her cup of tea. 'Suppose I show you how you may be revenged on Mr. Mountjoy,' she said.

'Well?'

'Will you remember what I asked you to

do for me, if Lord Harry takes us by surprise?'

He produced his pocket-diary, and told her to make a memorandum of it. She wrote as briefly as if she had been writing a telegram: 'Keep Lord Harry from seeing Miss Henley, till I have seen her first.'

'Now,' she said, taking a chair by the bedside, 'you shall know what a clever wife you have got. Listen to me.'

CHAPTER VIII

HER FATHER'S MESSAGE

LOOKING out of the drawing-room window, for the tenth time at least, Mountjoy at last saw Iris in the street, returning to the house.

She brought the maid with her into the drawing-room, in the gayest of good spirits, and presented Rhoda to Mountjoy.

'What a blessing a good long walk is, if we only knew it!' she exclaimed. 'Look at my little maid's colour! Who would suppose that she came here with heavy eyes and pale cheeks? Except that she loses her way in the town, whenever she goes out alone, we have every reason to congratulate ourselves

on our residence at Honeybuzzard. The doctor is Rhoda's good genius, and the doctor's wife is her fairy godmother.'

Mountjoy's courtesy having offered the customary congratulations, the maid was permitted to retire; and Iris was free to express her astonishment at the friendly relations established (by means of the dinner-table) between the two most dissimilar men on the face of creation.

'There is something overwhelming,' she declared, 'in the bare idea of your having asked him to dine with you—on such a short acquaintance, and being such a man! I should like to have peeped in, and seen you entertaining your guest with the luxuries of the hotel larder. Seriously, Hugh, your social sympathies have taken a range for which I was not prepared. After the example that you have set me, I feel ashamed of having doubted whether Mr. Vimpany was worthy

of his charming wife. Don't suppose that I am ungrateful to the doctor! He has found his way to my regard, after what he has done for Rhoda. I only fail to understand how he has possessed himself of *your* sympathies.'

So she ran on, enjoying the exercise of her own sense of humour in innocent ignorance of the serious interests which she was deriding.

Mountjoy tried to stop her, and tried in vain.

'No, no,' she persisted as mischievously as ever, 'the subject is too interesting to be dismissed. I am dying to know how you and your guest got through the dinner. Did he take more wine than was good for him? And when he forgot his good manners, did he set it all right again by saying, "No offence," and passing the bottle?'

Hugh could endure it no longer. 'Pray control your high spirits for a moment,'

he said. 'I have news for you from home.'

Those words put an end to her outbreak of gaiety in an instant.

'News from my father?' she asked.

'Yes.'

'Is he coming here?'

'No; I have heard from him.'

'A letter?'

'A telegram,' Mountjoy explained, 'in answer to a letter from me. I did my best to press your claims on him, and I am glad to say I have not failed.'

'Hugh, dear Hugh! have you succeeded in reconciling us?'

Mountjoy produced the telegram. 'I asked Mr. Henley,' he said, 'to let me know at once whether he would receive you, and to answer plainly Yes or No. The message might have been more kindly expressed—but, at any rate, it is a favourable reply.'

Iris read the telegram. 'Is there another father in the world,' she said sadly, 'who would tell his daughter, when she asks to come home, that he will receive her on trial?'

'Surely, you are not offended with him, Iris?'

She shook her head. 'I am like you,' she said. 'I know him too well to be offended. He shall find me dutiful, he shall find me patient. I am afraid I must not expect you to wait for me in Honeybuzzard. Will you tell my father that I hope to return to him in a week's time?'

'Pardon me, Iris, I see no reason why you should waste a week in this town. On the contrary, the more eager you show yourself to return to your father, the more likely you are to recover your place in his estimation. I had planned to take you home by the next train.'

Iris looked at him in astonishment. 'Is it

possible that you mean what you say?' she asked.

'My dear, I do most assuredly mean what I say. Why should you hesitate? What possible reason can there be for staying here any longer?'

'Oh, Hugh, how you disappoint me! What has become of your kind feeling, your sense of justice, your consideration for others? Poor Mrs. Vimpany!'

'What has Mrs. Vimpany to do with it?'

Iris was indignant.

'What has Mrs. Vimpany to do with it?' she repeated. 'After all that I owe to that good creature's kindness; after I have promised to accompany her—she has so few happy days, poor soul!—on excursions to places of interest in the neighbourhood, do you expect me to leave her—no! it's worse than that—do you expect me to throw her aside like an old dress that I have worn out?

And this after I have so unjustly, so ungratefully suspected her in my own thoughts? Shameful! shameful!'

With some difficulty, Mountjoy controlled himself. After what she had just said, his lips were sealed on the subject of Mrs. Vimpany's true character. He could only persist in appealing to her duty to her father.

'You are allowing your quick temper to carry you to strange extremities,' he answered. 'If I think it of more importance to hasten a reconciliation with your father than to encourage you to make excursions with a lady whom you have only known for a week or two, what have I done to deserve such an outbreak of anger? Hush! Not a word more now! Here is the lady herself.'

As he spoke, Mrs. Vimpany joined them; returning from her interview with her husband at the inn. She looked first at Iris,

and at once perceived signs of disturbance in the young lady's face.

Concealing her anxiety under that wonderful stage smile, which affords a refuge to so many secrets, Mrs. Vimpany said a few words excusing her absence. Miss Henley answered, without the slightest change in her friendly manner to the doctor's wife. The signs of disturbance were evidently attributable to some entirely unimportant cause from Mrs. Vimpany's point of view. Mr. Mountjoy's discoveries had not been communicated yet.

In Hugh's state of mind, there was some irritating influence in the presence of the mistress of the house, which applied the spur to his wits. He mischievously proposed submitting to her the question in dispute between Iris and himself.

'It is a very simple matter,' he said to Mrs. Vimpany. 'Miss Henley's father is anxious that she should return to him, after

an estrangement between them which is happily at an end. Do you think she ought to allow any accidental engagements to prevent her from going home at once? If she requests your indulgence, under the circumstances, has she any reason to anticipate a refusal?'

Mrs. Vimpany's expressive eyes looked up, with saintly resignation, at the dirty ceiling —and asked in dumb show what she had done to deserve the injury implied by a doubt!

'Mr. Mountjoy,' she said sternly, 'you insult me by asking the question. Dear Miss Henley,' she continued, turning to Iris, '*you* will do me justice, I am sure. Am I capable of allowing my own feelings to stand in the way, when your filial duty is concerned? Leave me, my sweet friend. Go! I entreat you, go home!'

She retired up the stage—no, no; she withdrew to the other end of the room—and

burst into the most becoming of all human tears, theatrical tears. Impulsive Iris hastened to comfort the personification of self-sacrifice, the model of all that was most unselfish in female submission. 'For shame! for shame!' she whispered, as she passed Mountjoy.

Beaten again by Mrs. Vimpany—with no ties of relationship to justify resistance to Miss Henley; with two women against him, entrenched behind the privileges of their sex—the one last sacrifice of his own feelings, in the interests of Iris, that Hugh could make was to control the impulse which naturally urged him to leave the house. In the helpless position in which he had now placed himself, he could only wait to see what course Mrs. Vimpany might think it desirable to take. Would she request him, in her most politely malicious way, to bring his visit to an end? No: she looked at him—hesitated—directed a furtive glance towards the view of

the street from the window—smiled mysteriously—and completed the sacrifice of her own feelings in these words:

'Dear Miss Henley, let me help you to pack up.'

Iris positively refused.

'No,' she said, 'I don't agree with Mr. Mountjoy. My father leaves it to me to name the day when we meet. I hold you, my dear, to our engagement—I don't leave an affectionate friend as I might leave a stranger.'

Even if Mr. Mountjoy communicated his discoveries to Miss Henley, on the way home, there would be no danger now of her believing him. Mrs. Vimpany put her powerful arm round the generous Iris, and, with infinite grace, thanked her by a kiss.

'Your kindness will make my lonely lot in life harder than ever to bear,' she murmured, 'when you are gone.'

'But we may hope to meet in London,'

Iris reminded her, 'unless Mr. Vimpany alters his mind about leaving this place.'

'My husband will not do that, dear. He is determined to try his luck, as he says, in London. In the meantime you will give me your address, won't you? Perhaps you will even promise to write to me?'

Iris instantly gave her promise, and wrote down her address in London.

Mountjoy made no attempt to interfere: it was needless.

If the maid had not fallen ill on the journey, and if Mrs. Vimpany had followed Miss Henley to London, there would have been little to fear in the discovery of her address—and there was little to fear now. The danger to Iris was not in what might happen while she was living under her father's roof, but in what might happen if she was detained (by plans for excursions) in Mr.

Vimpany's house, until Lord Harry might join her there.

Rather than permit this to happen, Hugh (in sheer desperation) meditated charging Mrs. Vimpany, to her face, with being the Irish lord's spy, and proving the accusation by challenging her to produce the registered letter and the diamond pin.

While he was still struggling with his own reluctance to inflict this degrading exposure on a woman, the talk between the two ladies came to an end. Mrs. Vimpany returned again to the window. On this occasion, she looked out into the street—with her handkerchief (was it used as a signal?) exhibited in her hand. Iris, on her side, advanced to Mountjoy. Easily moved to anger, her nature was incapable of sullen perseverance in a state of enmity. To see Hugh still patiently waiting—still risking the chances of insult—devoted to her, and forgiving her—was

at once a reproach that punished Iris, and a mute appeal that no true woman's heart could resist.

With tears in her eyes, she said to him: 'There must be no coolness between you and me. I lost my temper, and spoke shamefully to you. My dear, I am indeed sorry for it. You are never hard on me—you won't be hard on me now?'

She offered her hand to him. He had just raised it to his lips—when the drawing-room door was roughly opened. They both looked round.

The man of all others whom Hugh least desired to see was the man who now entered the room. The victim of 'light claret'—privately directed to lurk in the street, until he saw a handkerchief fluttering at the window—had returned to the house; primed with his clever wife's instructions; ready and eager to be even with Mountjoy for the dinner at the inn.

CHAPTER IX

MR. VIMPANY ON INTOXICATION

THERE was no unsteadiness in the doctor's walk, and no flush on his face. He certainly did strut when he entered the room; and he held up his head with dignity, when he discovered Mountjoy. But he seemed to preserve his self-control. Was the man sober again already?

His wife approached him with her set smile; the appearance of her lord and master filled Mrs. Vimpany with perfectly-assumed emotions of agreeable surprise.

'This is an unexpected pleasure,' she said. 'You seldom favour us with your company,

my dear, so early in the evening. Are there fewer patients in want of your advice than usual?'

'You are mistaken, Arabella. I am here in the performance of a painful duty.'

The doctor's language, and the doctor's manner, presented him to Iris in a character that was new to her. What effect had he produced on Mrs. Vimpany? That excellent friend to travellers in distress lowered her eyes to the floor, and modestly preserved silence. Mr. Vimpany proceeded to the performance of his duty; his painful responsibility seemed to strike him at first from a medical point of view.

'If there is a poison which undermines the sources of life,' he remarked, 'it is alcohol. If there is a vice that degrades humanity, it is intoxication. Mr. Mountjoy, are you aware that I am looking at you?'

'Impossible not to be aware of that,'

Hugh answered. 'May I ask why you are looking at me?' It was not easy to listen gravely to Mr. Vimpany's denunciation of intemperance, after what had taken place at the dinner of that day. Hugh smiled. The moral majesty of the doctor entered its protest.

'This is really shameful,' he said. 'The least you can do is to take it seriously.'

'What is it?' Mountjoy asked. 'And why am I to take it seriously?'

Mr. Vimpany's reply was, to say the least of it, indirect. If such an expression may be permitted, it smelt of the stage. Viewed in connection with Mrs. Vimpany's persistent assumption of silent humility, it suggested to Mountjoy a secret understanding, of some kind, between husband and wife.

'What has become of your conscience, sir?' Mr. Vimpany demanded. 'Is that silent monitor dead within you? After giving me a

bad dinner, do you demand an explanation? Ha! you shall have it.'

Having delivered himself to this effect, he added action to words. Walking grandly to the door, he threw it open, and saluted Mountjoy with an ironical bow. Iris observed that act of insolence; her colour rose, her eyes glittered. 'Do you see what he has just done?' she said to Mrs. Vimpany.

The doctor's wife answered softly: 'I don't understand it.' After a glance at her husband, she took Iris by the hand: 'Dear Miss Henley, shall we retire to my room?'

Iris drew her hand away. 'Not unless Mr. Mountjoy wishes it,' she said.

'Certainly not!' Hugh declared. 'Pray remain here; your presence will help me to keep my temper.' He stepped up to Mr. Vimpany. 'Have you any particular reason for opening that door?' he asked.

The doctor was a rascal; but, to do him justice, he was no coward. 'Yes,' he said, 'I have a reason.'

'What is it, if you please?'

'Christian forbearance,' Mr. Vimpany answered.

'Forbearance towards me?' Mountjoy continued.

The doctor's dignity suddenly deserted him.

'Aha, my boy, you have got it at last!' he cried. 'It's pleasant to understand each other, isn't it? You see, I'm a plain-spoken fellow; I don't wish to give offence. If there's one thing more than another I pride myself on, it's my indulgence for human frailty. But, in my position here, I'm obliged to be careful. Upon my soul, I can't continue my acquaintance with a man who—oh, come! come! don't look as if you didn't understand me. The circumstances are

against you, sir. You have treated me infamously.'

'Under what circumstances have I treated you infamously?' Hugh asked.

'Under pretence of giving me a dinner,' Mr. Vimpany shouted—'the worst dinner I ever sat down to!'

His wife signed to him to be silent. He took no notice of her. She insisted on being understood. 'Say no more!' she warned him, in a tone of command.

The brute side of his nature, roused by Mountjoy's contemptuous composure, was forcing its way outwards; he set his wife at defiance.

'Then don't let him look at me as if he thought I was in a state of intoxication!' cried the furious doctor. 'There's the man, Miss, who tried to make me tipsy,' he went on, actually addressing himself to Iris. 'Thanks to my habits of sobriety, he has been caught

in his own trap. *He's* intoxicated. Ha, friend Mountjoy, have you got the right explanation at last? There's the door, sir!'

Mrs. Vimpany felt that this outrage was beyond endurance. If something was not done to atone for it, Miss Henley would be capable—her face, at that moment, answered for her—of leaving the house with Mr. Mountjoy. Mrs. Vimpany seized her husband indignantly by the arm.

'You brute, you have spoilt everything!' she said to him. 'Apologise directly to Mr. Mountjoy. You won't?'

'I won't!'

Experience had taught his wife how to break him to her will. 'Do you remember my diamond pin?' she whispered.

He looked startled. Perhaps he thought she had lost the pin.

'Where is it?' he asked eagerly.

'Gone to London to be valued. Beg Mr. Mountjoy's pardon, or I will put the money in the bank—and not one shilling of it do you get.'

In the meanwhile, Iris had justified Mrs. Vimpany's apprehensions. Her indignation noticed nothing but the insult offered to Hugh. She was too seriously agitated to be able to speak to him. Still admirably calm, his one anxiety was to compose her.

'Don't be afraid,' he said; 'it is impossible that I can degrade myself by quarrelling with Mr. Vimpany. I only wait here to know what you propose to do. You have Mrs. Vimpany to think of.'

'I have nobody to think of but You,' Iris replied. 'But for me, you would never have been in this house. After the insult that has been offered to you—oh, Hugh, I feel it too! —let us return to London together. I have

only to tell Rhoda we are going away, and to make my preparations for travelling. Send for me from the inn, and I will be ready in time for the next train.'

Mrs. Vimpany approached Mountjoy, leading her husband.

'Sorry I have offended you,' the doctor said. 'Beg your pardon. It's only a joke. No offence, I hope?'

His servility was less endurable than his insolence. Telling him that he need say no more, Mountjoy bowed to Mrs. Vimpany, and left the room. She returned his bow mechanically, in silence. Mr. Vimpany followed Hugh out—thinking of the diamond pin, and eager to open the house door, as another act of submission which might satisfy his wife.

Even a clever woman will occasionally make mistakes; especially when her temper happens to have been roused. Mrs. Vimpany

found herself in a false position, due entirely to her own imprudence.

She had been guilty of three serious errors. In the first place, she had taken it for granted that Mr. Vimpany's restorative mixture would completely revive the sober state of his brains. In the second place, she had trusted him with her vengeance on the man who had found his way to her secrets through her husband's intemperance. In the third place, she had rashly assumed that the doctor, in carrying out her instructions for insulting Mountjoy, would keep within the limits which she had prescribed to him, when she hit on the audacious idea of attributing his disgraceful conduct to the temptation offered by his host's example. As a consequence of these acts of imprudence, she had exposed herself to a misfortune that she honestly dreaded—the loss of the place which she had carefully maintained in Miss Henley's

estimation. In the contradictory confusion of feelings, so often found in women, this deceitful and dangerous creature had been conquered—little by little, as she had herself described it—by that charm of sweetness and simplicity in Iris, of which her own depraved nature presented no trace. She now spoke with hesitation, almost with timidity, in addressing the woman whom she had so cleverly deceived, at the time when they first met.

'Must I give up all, Miss Henley, that I most value?' she asked.

'I hardly understand you, Mrs. Vimpany.'

'I will try to make it plainer. Do you really mean to leave me, this evening?'

'I do.'

'May I own that I am grieved to hear it? Your departure will deprive me of some happy hours, in your company.'

'Your husband's conduct leaves me no alternative,' Iris replied.

'Pray do not humiliate me by speaking of my husband! I only want to know if there is a harder trial of my fortitude still to come. Must I lose the privilege of being your friend?'

'I hope I am not capable of such injustice as that,' Iris declared. 'It would be hard indeed to lay the blame of Mr. Vimpany's shameful behaviour on you. I don't forget that you made him offer an apology. Some women, married to such a man as that, might have been afraid of him. No, no; you have been a good friend to me—and I mean to remember it.'

Mrs. Vimpany's gratitude was too sincerely felt to be expressed with her customary readiness. She only said what the stupidest woman in existence could have said: 'Thank you.'

In the silence that followed, the rapid movement of carriage-wheels became audible in the street. The sound stopped at the door of the doctor's house.

CHAPTER X

THE MOCKERY OF DECEIT

HAD Mountjoy arrived to take Iris away, before her preparations for travelling were complete? Both the ladies hurried to the window, but they were too late. The rapid visitor, already hidden from them under the portico, was knocking smartly at the door. In another minute, a man's voice in the hall asked for 'Miss Henley.' The tones—clear, mellow, and pleasantly varied here and there by the Irish accent—were not to be mistaken by anyone who had already heard them. The man in the hall was Lord Harry.

In that serious emergency, Mrs. Vimpany recovered her presence of mind.

She made for the door, with the object of speaking to Lord Harry before he could present himself in the drawing-room. But Iris had heard him ask for her in the hall; and that one circumstance instantly stripped of its concealments the character of the woman in whose integrity she had believed. Her first impression of Mrs. Vimpany — so sincerely repented, so eagerly atoned for — had been the right impression after all! Younger, lighter, and quicker than the doctor's wife, Iris reached the door first, and laid her hand on the lock.

'Wait a minute,' she said.

Mrs. Vimpany hesitated. For the first time in her life at a loss what to say, she could only sign to Iris to stand back. Iris refused to move. She put her terrible question in the plainest words:

'How does Lord Harry know that I am in this house?'

The wretched woman (listening intently for the sound of a step on the stairs) refused to submit to a shameful exposure, even now. To her perverted moral sense, any falsehood was acceptable, as a means of hiding herself from discovery by Iris. In the very face of detection, the skilled deceiver kept up the mockery of deceit.

'My dear,' she said, 'what has come to you? Why won't you let me go to my room?'

Iris eyed her with a look of scornful surprise. 'What next?' she said. 'Are you impudent enough to pretend that I have not found you out, yet?'

Sheer desperation still sustained Mrs. Vimpany's courage. She played her assumed character against the contemptuous incredulity of Iris, as she had sometimes played

her theatrical characters against the hissing and hooting of a brutal audience.

'Miss Henley,' she said, 'you forget yourself!'

'Do you think I didn't see in your face,' Iris rejoined, 'that *you* heard him, too? Answer my question.'

'What question?'

'You have just heard it.'

'No!'

'You false woman!'

'Don't forget, Miss Henley, that you are speaking to a lady.'

'I am speaking to Lord Harry's spy!'

Their voices rose loud: the excitement on either side had reached its climax; neither the one nor the other was composed enough to notice the sound of the carriage-wheels, leaving the house again. In the meanwhile, nobody came to the drawing-room door.

Mrs. Vimpany was too well acquainted with the hot-headed Irish lord not to conclude that he would have made himself heard, and would have found his way to Iris, but for some obstacle, below stairs, for which he was not prepared. The doctor's wife did justice to the doctor at last. Another person had, in all probability, heard Lord Harry's voice —and that person might have been her husband.

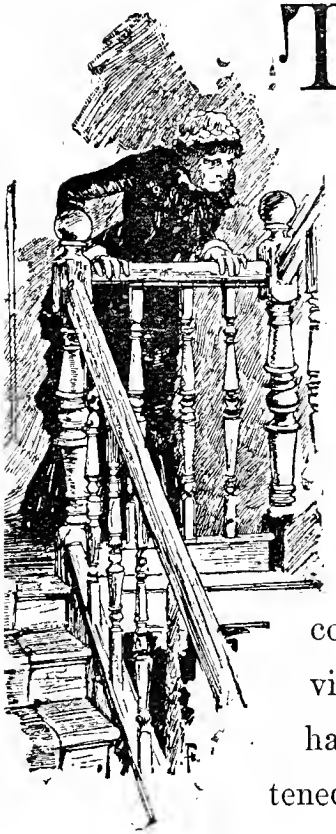
Was it possible that he remembered the service which she had asked of him; and, even if he had succeeded in calling it to mind, was his discretion to be trusted? As those questions occurred to her, the desire to obtain some positive information was more than she was able to resist. Mrs. Vimpany attempted to leave the drawing-room for the second time.

But the same motive had already urged

Miss Henley to action. Again, the younger woman outstripped the elder. Iris descended the stairs, resolved to discover the cause of the sudden suspension of events in the lower part of the house.

CHAPTER XI

MRS. VIMPANY'S FAREWELL



THE doctor's wife followed Miss Henley out of the room, as far as the landing — and waited there.

She had her reasons for placing this restraint on herself. The position of the landing concealed her from the view of a person in the hall. If she only listened for the sound of

voices she might safely discover whether Lord Harry was, or was not, still in the house. In the first event, it would be easy to interrupt his interview with Iris, before the talk could lead to disclosures which Mrs. Vimpany had every reason to dread. In the second event, there would be no need to show herself.

Meanwhile, Iris opened the dining-room door and looked in.

Nobody was there. The one other room on the ground floor, situated at the back of the building, was the doctor's consulting-room. She knocked at the door. Mr. Vimpany's voice answered: 'Come in.' There he was alone, drinking brandy and water, and smoking his big black cigar.

'Where is Lord Harry?' she said.

'In Ireland, I suppose,' Mr. Vimpany answered quietly.

Iris wasted no time in making useless

inquiries. She closed the door again, and left him. He, too, was undoubtedly in the conspiracy to keep her deceived. How had it been done? Where was the wild lord, at that moment?

Whilst she was pursuing these reflections in the hall, Rhoda came up from the servants' tea-table in the kitchen. Her mistress gave her the necessary instructions for packing, and promised to help her before long. Mrs. Vimpany's audacious resolution to dispute the evidence of her own senses, still dwelt on Miss Henley's mind. Too angry to think of the embarrassment which an interview with Lord Harry would produce, after they had said their farewell words in Ireland, she was determined to prevent the doctor's wife from speaking to him first, and claiming him as an accomplice in her impudent denial of the truth. If he had been, by any chance, deluded into leaving the house, he would

sooner or later discover the trick that had been played on him, and would certainly return. Iris took a chair in the hall.

It is due to the doctor to relate that he had indeed justified his wife's confidence in him.

The diamond pin, undergoing valuation in London, still represented a present terror in his mind. The money, the money—he was the most attentive husband in England when he thought of the money! At the time when Lord Harry's carriage stopped at his house-door, he was in the dining-room, taking a bottle of brandy from the cellaret in the side-board. Looking instantly out of the window, he discovered who the visitor was, and decided on consulting his instructions in the pocket-diary. The attempt was rendered useless, as soon as he had opened the book, by the unlucky activity of the servant in

answering the door. Her master stopped her in the hall. He was pleasantly conscious of the recovery of his cunning. But his memory (far from active under the most favourable circumstances) was slower than ever at helping him now. On the spur of the moment, he could only call to mind that he had been ordered to prevent a meeting between Lord Harry and Iris. 'Show the gentleman into my consulting-room,' he said.

Lord Harry found the doctor enthroned on his professional chair, surprised and delighted to see his distinguished friend. The impetuous Irishman at once asked for Miss Henley.

'Gone,' Mr. Vimpany answered.

'Gone—where?' the wild lord wanted to know next.

'To London.'

'By herself?'

'No; with Mr. Hugh Mountjoy.'

Lord Harry seized the doctor by the shoulders, and shook him: 'You don't mean to tell me Mountjoy is going to marry her?'

Mr. Vimpany feared nothing but the loss of money. The weaker and the older man of the two, he nevertheless followed the young lord's example, and shook him with right good-will. 'Let's see how you like it, in your turn,' he said. 'As for Mountjoy, I don't know whether he is married or single—and don't care.'

'The devil take your obstinacy! When did they start?'

'The devil take your questions! They started not long since.'

'Might I catch them at the station?'

'Yes; if you go at once.'

So the desperate doctor carried out his wife's instructions—without remembering the conditions which had accompanied them.

The way to the station took Lord Harry past the inn. He saw Hugh Mountjoy, through the open house door, paying his bill at the bar. In an instant the carriage was stopped, and the two men (never on friendly terms) were formally bowing to each other.

'I was told I should find you,' Lord Harry said, 'with Miss Henley, at the station.'

'Who gave you your information?'

'Vimpany—the doctor.'

'He ought to know that the train isn't due at the station for an hour yet.'

'Has the blackguard deceived me? One word more, Mr. Mountjoy. Is Miss Henley at the inn?'

'No.'

'Are you going with her to London?'

'I must leave Miss Henley to answer that.'

'Where is she, sir?'

'There is an end to everything, my lord,

in the world we live in. You have reached the end of my readiness to answer questions.'

The Englishman and the Irishman looked at each other: the Anglo-Saxon was impenetrably cool; the Celt was flushed and angry. They might have been on the brink of a quarrel, but for Lord Harry's native quickness of perception, and his exercise of it at that moment. When he had called at Mr. Vimpany's house, and had asked for Iris, the doctor had got rid of him by means of a lie. After this discovery, at what conclusion could he arrive? The doctor was certainly keeping Iris out of his way. Reasoning in this rapid manner, Lord Harry let one offence pass, in his headlong eagerness to resent another. He instantly left Mountjoy. Again, the carriage rattled back along the street; but it was stopped before it reached Mr. Vimpany's door.

Lord Harry knew the people whom he

had to deal with, and took measures to approach the house silently, on foot. The coachman received orders to look out for a signal, which should tell him when he was wanted again.

Mr. Vimpany's ears, vigilantly on the watch for suspicious events, detected no sound of carriage-wheels and no noisy use of the knocker. Still on his guard, however, a ring at the house-bell disturbed him in his consulting-room. Peeping into the hall, he saw Iris opening the door, and stole back to his room. 'The devil take her!' he said, alluding to Miss Henley, and thinking of the enviable proprietor of the diamond pin.

At the unexpected appearance of Iris, Lord Harry forgot every consideration which ought to have been present to his mind, at that critical moment.

He advanced to her with both hands held out in cordial greeting. She signed to him

contemptuously to stand back—and spoke in tones cautiously lowered, after a glance at the door of the consulting-room.

'My only reason for consenting to see you,' she said, 'is to protect myself from further deception. Your disgraceful conduct is known to me. Go now,' she continued, pointing to the stairs, 'and consult with your spy, as soon as you like.' The Irish lord listened—guiltily conscious of having deserved what she had said to him—without attempting to utter a word in excuse.

Still posted at the head of the stairs, the doctor's wife heard Iris speaking; but the tone was not loud enough to make the words intelligible at that distance; neither was any other voice audible in reply. Vaguely suspicious of some act of domestic treachery, Mrs. Vimpany began to descend the stairs. At the turning which gave her a view of the hall, she stopped; thunderstruck by the dis-

covery of Lord Harry and Miss Henley, together.

The presence of a third person seemed, in some degree, to relieve Lord Harry. He ran upstairs to salute Mrs. Vimpany, and was met again by a cold reception and a hostile look.

Strongly and strangely contrasted, the two confronted each other on the stairs. The faded woman, wan and ghastly under cruel stress of mental suffering, stood face to face with a fine, tall, lithe man, in the prime of his health and strength. Here were the bright blue eyes, the winning smile, and the natural grace of movement, which find their own way to favour in the estimation of the gentler sex. This irreclaimable wanderer among the perilous by-ways of the earth—christened 'Irish blackguard,' among respectable members of society, when they spoke of him behind his back—attracted attention, even among the men. Looking at his daring, finely-

formed face, they noticed (as an exception to a general rule, in these days) the total suppression, by the razor, of whiskers, moustache, and beard. Strangers wondered whether Lord Harry was an actor or a Roman Catholic priest. Among chance acquaintances, those few favourites of Nature who are possessed of active brains, guessed that his life of adventure might well have rendered disguise necessary to his safety, in more than one part of the world. Sometimes they boldly put the question to him. The hot temper of an Irishman, in moments of excitement, is not infrequently a sweet temper in moments of calm. What they called Lord Harry's good-nature owned readily that he had been indebted, on certain occasions, to the protection of a false beard, and perhaps a colouring of his face and hair to match. The same easy disposition now asserted itself, under the merciless enmity of Mrs. Vimpany's

eyes. 'If I have done anything to offend you,' he said, with an air of puzzled humility, 'I'm sure I am sorry for it. Don't be angry, Arabella, with an old friend. Why won't you shake hands?'

'I have kept your secret, and done your dirty work,' Mrs. Vimpany replied. 'And what is my reward? Miss Henley can tell you how your Irish blundering has ruined me in a lady's estimation. Shake hands, indeed? You will never shake hands with Me again as long as you live!'

She said those words without looking at him; her eyes were resting on Iris now. From the moment when she had seen the two together, she knew that it was all over; further denial in the face of plain proofs would be useless indeed! Submission was the one alternative left.

'Miss Henley,' she said, 'if you can feel pity for another woman's sorrow and shame,

let me have a last word with you—out of this man's hearing.'

There was nothing artificial in her tones or her looks; no acting could have imitated the sad sincerity with which she spoke. Touched by that change, Iris accompanied her as she ascended the stairs. After a little hesitation, Lord Harry followed them. Mrs. Vimpany turned on him when they reached the drawing-room landing. 'Must I shut the door in your face?' she asked.

He was as pleasantly patient as ever:

'You needn't take the trouble to do that, my dear; I'll only ask your leave to sit down and wait on the stairs. When you have done with Miss Henley, just call me in. And, by the way, don't be alarmed in case of a little noise—say a heavy man tumbling downstairs. If the blackguard it's your misfortune to be married to happens to show himself, I shall be under the necessity of kicking him. That's all.'

Mrs. Vimpany closed the door. She spoke to Iris respectfully, as she might have addressed a stranger occupying a higher rank in life than herself.

'There is an end, madam, to our short acquaintance; and, as we both know, an end to it for ever. When we first met—let me tell the truth at last!—I felt a malicious pleasure in deceiving you. After that time, I was surprised to find that you grew on my liking. Can you understand the wickedness that tried to resist you? It was useless; your good influence has been too strong for me. Strange, isn't it? I have lived a life of deceit, among bad people. What could you expect of me, after that? I heaped lies on lies—I would have denied that the sun was in the heavens—rather than find myself degraded in your opinion. Well! that is all over—useless, quite useless now. Pray don't mistake me. I am not attempting to excuse

myself; a confession was due to you; the confession is made. It is too late to hope that you will forgive me. If you will permit it, I have only one favour to ask. Forget me.'

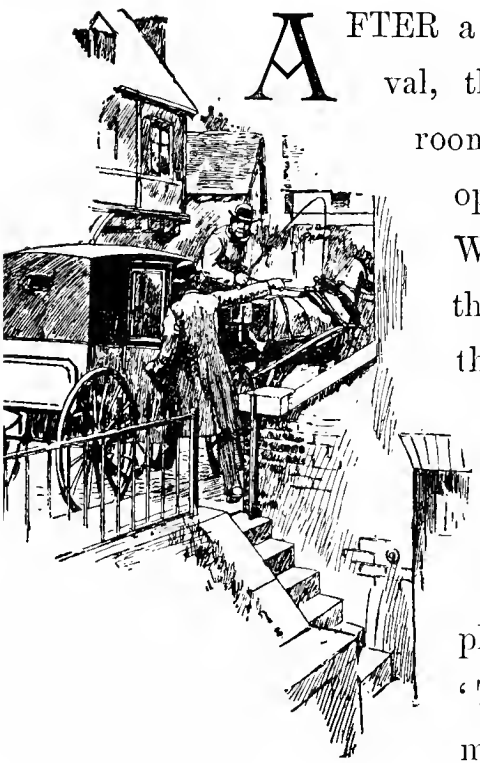
She turned away with a last hopeless look, which said as plainly as if in words: 'I am not worth a reply.'

Generous Iris insisted on speaking to her.

'I believe you are truly sorry for what you have done,' she said: 'I can never forget that—I can never forget You.' She held out her pitying hand. Mrs. Vimpany was too bitterly conscious of the past to touch it. Even a spy is not beneath the universal reach of the heartache. There were tears in the miserable woman's eyes when she had looked her last at Iris Henley.

CHAPTER XII

LORD HARRY'S DEFENCE



AFTER a short interval, the drawing-room door was opened again. Waiting on the threshold the Irish lord asked if he might come in. Iris replied coldly. 'This is not my house,

she said; 'I must leave you to decide for yourself.'

Lord Harry crossed the room to speak to her—and stopped. There was no sign of relenting towards him in that dearly-loved face. 'I wonder whether it would be a relief to you,' he suggested with piteous humility, 'if I went away?'

If she had been true to herself, she would have said, Yes. Where is the woman to be found, in her place, with a heart hard enough to have set her that example? She pointed to a chair. He felt her indulgence gratefully. Following the impulse of the moment, he attempted to excuse his conduct.

'There is only one thing I can say for myself,' he confessed, 'I didn't begin by deceiving you. While you had your eye on me, Iris, I was an honourable man.'

This extraordinary defence reduced her to silence. Was there another man in the world

who would have pleaded for pardon in that way? 'I'm afraid I have not made myself understood,' he said. 'May I try again?'

'If you please.'

The vagabond nobleman made a resolute effort to explain himself intelligibly, this time:

'See now! We said good-bye, over there, in the poor old island. Well, indeed I meant it, when I owned that I was unworthy of you. I didn't contradict you, when you said you could never be my wife, after such a life as I have led. And, do remember, I submitted to your returning to England, without presuming to make a complaint. Ah, my sweet girl, it was easy to submit, while I could look at you, and hear the sound of your voice, and beg for that last kiss—and get it. Reverend gentlemen talk about the fall of Adam. What was that to the fall of Harry, when he was back in his own little cottage, without the

hope of ever seeing you again? To the best of my recollection, the serpent that tempted Eve was up a tree. I found the serpent that tempted Me, sitting waiting in my own arm-chair, and bent on nothing worse than borrowing a trifle of money. Need I say who she was? I don't doubt that you think her a wicked woman.'

Never ready in speaking of acts of kindness, on her own part, Iris answered with some little reserve: 'I have learnt to think better of Mrs. Vimpany than you suppose.'

Lord Harry began to look like a happy man, for the first time since he had entered the room.

'I ought to have known it!' he burst out. 'Yours is the well-balanced mind, dear, that tempers justice with mercy. Mother Vimpany has had a hard life of it. Just change places with her for a minute or so—and you'll understand what she has had to go through.

Find yourself, for instance, in Ireland, without the means to take you back to England. Add to that, a husband who sends you away to make money for him at the theatre, and a manager (not an Irishman, thank God!) who refuses to engage you—after your acting has filled his dirty pockets in past days—because your beauty has faded with time. Doesn't your bright imagination see it all now? My old friend Arabella, ready and anxious to serve me—and a sinking at this poor fellow's heart when he knew, if he once lost the trace of you, he might lose it for ever—there's the situation, as they call it on the stage. I wish I could say for myself what I may say for Mrs. Vimpany. It's such a pleasure to a clever woman to engage in a little deceit—we can't blame her, can we?'

Iris protested gently against a code of morality which included the right of deceit among the privileges of the sex. Lord Harry

slipped through her fingers with the admirable Irish readiness; he agreed with Miss Henley that he was entirely wrong.

'And don't spare me while you're about it,' he suggested. 'Lay all the blame of that shameful stratagem on my shoulders. It was a despicable thing to do. When I had you watched, I acted in a manner—I won't say unworthy of a gentleman; have I been a gentleman since I first ran away from home? Why, it's even been said my way of speaking is no longer the way of a gentleman; and small wonder, too, after the company I've kept. Ah, well! I'm off again, darling, on a sea voyage. Will you forgive me now? or will you wait till I come back, if I do come back? God knows!' He dropped on his knees, and kissed her hand. 'Anyway,' he said, 'whether I live or whether I die, it will be some consolation to remember that I asked your pardon—and perhaps got it.'

'Take it, Harry; I can't help forgiving you!'

She had done her best to resist him, and she had answered in those merciful words.

The effect was visible, perilously visible, as he rose from his knees. Her one chance of keeping the distance between them, on which she had been too weak to insist, was not to encourage him by silence. Abruptly, desperately, she made a commonplace inquiry about his proposed voyage. 'Tell me,' she resumed, 'where are you going when you leave England?'

'Oh, to find money, dear, if I can—to pick up diamonds, or to hit on a mine of gold, and so forth.'

The fine observation of Iris detected something not quite easy in his manner, as he made that reply. He tried to change the subject: she deliberately returned to it. 'Your account of your travelling-plans is

rather vague,' she told him. 'Do you know when you are likely to return?'

He took her hand. One of the rings on her fingers happened to be turned the wrong way. He set it in the right position, and discovered an opal. 'Ah! the unlucky stone!' he cried, and turned it back again out of sight. She drew away her hand. 'I asked you,' she persisted, 'when you expect to return?'

He laughed—not so gaily as usual.

'How do I know I shall ever get back?' he answered. 'Sometimes the seas turn traitor, and sometimes the savages. I have had so many narrow escapes of my life, I can't expect my luck to last for ever.' He made a second attempt to change the subject. 'I wonder whether you're likely to pay another visit to Ireland? My cottage is entirely at your disposal, Iris dear. Oh, when I'm out of the way, of course! The place seemed to

please your fancy, when you saw it. You will find it well taken care of, I answer for that.'

Iris asked who was taking care of his cottage?

The wild lord's face saddened. He hesitated; rose from his chair restlessly, and walked away to the window; returned, and made up his mind to reply.

'My dear, you know her. She was the old housekeeper at——'

His voice failed him. He was unable, or unwilling, to pronounce the name of Arthur's farm.

Knowing, it is needless to say, that he had alluded to Mrs. Lewson, Iris warmly commended him for taking care of her old nurse. At the same time, she remembered the unfriendly terms in which the housekeeper had alluded to Lord Harry, when they had talked of him.

'Did you find no difficulty,' she asked, 'in persuading Mrs. Lewson to enter your service?'

'Oh, yes, plenty of difficulty; I found my bad character in my way, as usual.' It was a relief to him, at that moment, to talk of Mrs. Lewson; the Irish humour and the Irish accent both asserted themselves in his reply. 'The curious old creature told me to my face I was a scamp. I took leave to remind her that it was the duty of a respectable person like herself, to reform scamps; I also mentioned that I was going away, and she would be master and mistress too on my small property. That softened her heart towards me. You will mostly find old women amenable, if you get at them by way of their dignity. Besides, there was another lucky circumstance that helped me. The neighbourhood of my cottage has some attraction for Mrs. Lewson.

She didn't say particularly what it was—and I never asked her to tell me.'

'Surely you might have guessed it, without being told,' Iris reminded him. 'Mrs. Lewson's faithful heart loves poor Arthur's memory—and Arthur's grave is not far from your cottage.'

'Don't speak of him!'

It was said loudly, peremptorily, passionately. He looked at her with angry astonishment in his face. 'You loved him too!' he said. 'Can you speak of him quietly? The noblest, truest, sweetest man that ever the Heavens looked on, foully assassinated. And the wretch who murdered him still living, free—oh, what is God's providence about?—is there no retribution that will follow him? no just hand that will revenge Arthur's death?'

As those fierce words escaped him, he was no longer the easy, gentle, joyous creature

whom Iris had known and loved. The furious passions of the Celtic race glittered savagely in his eyes, and changed to a grey horrid pallor the healthy colour that was natural to his face. 'Oh, my temper, my temper!' he cried, as Iris shrank from him. 'She hates me now, and no wonder.' He staggered away from her, and burst into a convulsive fit of crying, dreadful to hear. Compassion, divine compassion, mastered the earthlier emotion of terror in the great heart of the woman who loved him. She followed him, and laid her hand caressingly on his shoulder. 'I don't hate you, my dear,' she said. 'I am sorry for Arthur—and, oh, so sorry for You!' He caught her in his arms. His gratitude, his repentance, his silent farewell were all expressed in a last kiss. It was a moment, never to be forgotten to the end of their lives. Before she could speak, before she could think, he had left her.

She called him back, through the open door. He never returned; he never even replied. She ran to the window, and threw it up—and was just in time to see him signal to the carriage and leap into it. Her horror of the fatal purpose that was but too plainly rooted in him—her conviction that he was on the track of the assassin, self-devoted to exact the terrible penalty of blood for blood—emboldened her to insist on being heard. 'Come back,' she cried. 'I must, I will, speak with you.'

He waved his hand to her with a gesture of despair. 'Start your horses,' he shouted to the coachman. Alarmed by his voice and his look, the man asked where he should drive to. Lord Harry pointed furiously to the onward road. 'Drive,' he answered, 'to the Devil!'

THE END OF THE FIRST PERIOD

SECOND PERIOD

CHAPTER XIII

IRIS AT HOME

A LITTLE more than four months had passed, since the return of Iris to her father's house.

Among other events which occurred, during the earlier part of that interval, the course adopted by Hugh Mountjoy when Miss Henley's suspicions of the Irish lord were first communicated to him, claims a foremost place.

It was impossible that the devoted friend of Iris could look at her, when they met again on their way to the station, without perceiving

the signs of serious agitation. Only waiting until they were alone in the railway carriage she opened her heart unreservedly to the man in whose clear intellect and true sympathy she could repose implicit trust. He listened to what she could repeat of Lord Harry's language with but little appearance of surprise. Iris had only reminded him of one, among the disclosures which had escaped Mr. Vimpany at the inn. Under the irresistible influence of good wine, the doctor had revealed the Irish lord's motive for remaining in his own country, after the assassination of Arthur Mountjoy. Hugh met the only difficulty in his way, without shrinking from it. He resolved to clear his mind of its natural prejudice against the rival who had been preferred to him, before he assumed the responsibility of guiding Iris by his advice.

When he had in some degree recovered confidence in his own unbiassed judgment, he

entered on the question of Lord Harry's purpose in leaving England.

Without attempting to dispute the conclusion at which Iris had arrived, he did his best to alleviate her distress. In his opinion, he was careful to tell her, a discovery of the destination to which Lord Harry proposed to betake himself might be achieved. The Irish lord's allusion to a new adventure which would occupy him in searching for diamonds or gold, might indicate a contemplated pursuit of the assassin, as well as a plausible excuse to satisfy Iris. It was at least possible that the murderer might have been warned of his danger if he remained in England, and that he might have contemplated directing his flight to a distant country, which would not only offer a safe refuge, but also hold out (in its mineral treasures) a hope of gain. Assuming that these circumstances had really happened, it was in Lord Harry's character to make sure

his revenge, by embarking in the steam-ship which the assassin of Arthur Mountjoy s a passenger.

Wild as this guess at the truth undoubtedly s, it had one merit: it might easily be put the test.

Hugh had bought the day's newspaper, the station. He proposed to consult the pping advertisements relating, in the first ce, to communication with the diamond- ies and the gold-fields of South Africa.

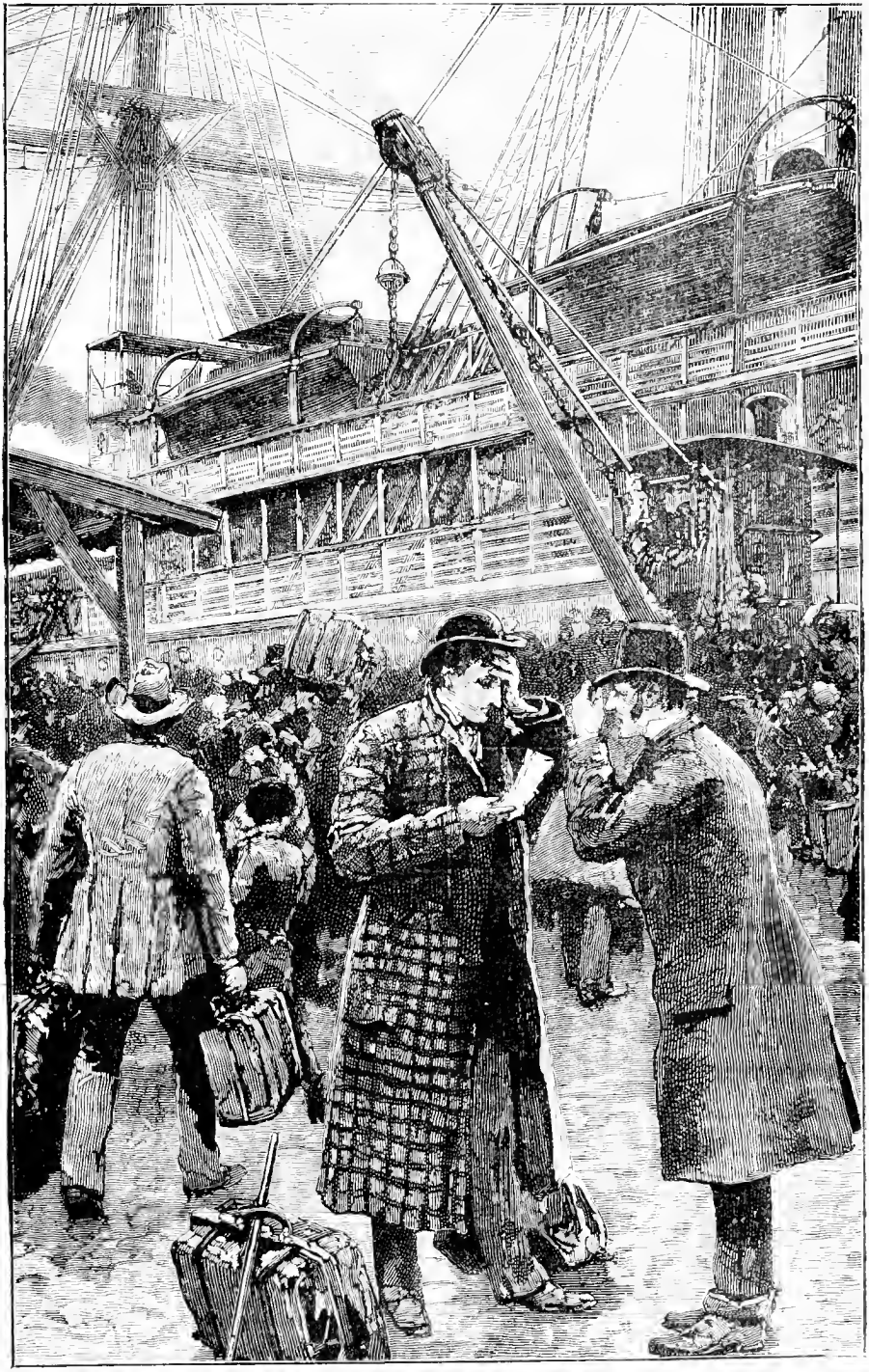
This course of proceeding at once in- med him that the first steamer, bound for it destination, would sail from London in o days' time. The obvious precaution to ce was to have the Docks watched; and ountjoy's steady old servant, who knew rd Harry by sight, was the man to employ.

Iris naturally inquired what good end uld be attained, if the anticipated discovery tually took place.

To this Mountjoy answered, that the one hope—a faint hope, he must needs confess—of inducing Lord Harry to reconsider his desperate purpose, lay in the influence of Iris herself. She must address a letter to him, announcing that his secret had been betrayed by his own language and conduct, and declaring that she would never again see him, or hold any communication with him, if he persisted in his savage resolution of revenge. Such was the desperate experiment which Mountjoy's generous and unselfish devotion to Iris now proposed to try.

The servant (duly entrusted with Miss Henley's letter) was placed on the watch—and the event which had been regarded as little better than a forlorn hope proved to be the event that really took place. Lord Harry was a passenger by the steamship.

Mountjoy's man presented the letter en-



The wild lord read it—looked (to use the messenger's own words) like a man cut to the heart and seemed at a loss what to say or do.

trusted to him, and asked respectfully if there was any answer. The wild lord read it—looked (to use the messenger's own words) like a man cut to the heart—seemed at a loss what to say or do—and only gave a verbal answer: 'I sincerely thank Miss Henley, and I promise to write when the ship touches at Madeira.' The servant continued to watch him when he went on board the steamer; saw him cast a look backwards, as if suspecting that he might have been followed; and then lost sight of him in the cabin. The vessel sailed after a long interval of delay, but he never reappeared on the deck.

The ambiguous message sent to her aroused the resentment of Iris; she thought it cruel. For some weeks perhaps to come, she was condemned to remain in doubt, and was left to endure the trial of her patience, without having Mountjoy at hand to encourage and console her. He had been called

away to the South of France by the illness of his father.

But the fortunes of Miss Henley, at this period of her life, had their brighter side. She found reason to congratulate herself on the reconciliation which had brought her back to her father. Mr. Henley had received her, not perhaps with affection, but certainly with kindness. 'If we don't get in each other's way, we shall do very well; I am glad to see you again.' That was all he had said to her, but it meant much from a soured and selfish man.

Her only domestic anxiety was caused by another failure in the health of her maid.

The Doctor declared that medical help would be of no avail, while Rhoda Bennet remained in London. In the country she had been born and bred, and to the country she must return. Mr. Henley's large landed property, on the north of London, happened

to include a farm in the neighbourhood of Muswell Hill. Wisely waiting for a favourable opportunity, Iris alluded to the good qualities which had made Rhoda almost as much her friend as her servant, and asked leave to remove the invalid to the healthy air of the farm.

Her anxiety about the recovery of a servant so astonished Mr. Henley, that he was hurried (as he afterwards declared) into granting his daughter's request. After this concession, the necessary arrangements were easily made. The influence of Iris won the good-will of the farmer and his wife; Rhoda, as an expert and willing needlewoman, being sure of a welcome, for her own sake, in a family which included a number of young children. Miss Henley had only to order her carriage, and to be within reach of the farm. A week seldom passed without a meeting between the mistress and the maid.

In the meantime, Mountjoy (absent in France) did not forget to write to Iris.

His letters offered little hope of a speedy return. The doctors had not concealed from him that his father's illness would end fatally; but there were reserves of vital power still left, which might prolong the struggle. Under these melancholy circumstances, he begged that Iris would write to him. The oftener she could tell him of the little events of her life at home, the more kindly she would brighten the days of a dreary life.

Eager to show, even in a trifling matter, how gratefully she appreciated Mountjoy's past kindness, Iris related the simple story of her life at home, in weekly letters addressed to her good friend. After telling Hugh (among other things) of Rhoda's establishment at the farm, she had some unexpected results to relate, which had followed the attempt to provide herself with a new maid.

Two young women had been successively engaged—each recommended, by the lady whom she had last served, with that utter disregard of moral obligation which appears to be shamelessly on the increase in the England of our day. The first of the two maids, described as 'rather excitable,' revealed infirmities of temper which suggested a lunatic asylum as the only fit place for her. The second young woman, detected in stealing eau-de-cologne, and using it (mixed with water) as an intoxicating drink, claimed merciful construction of her misconduct, on the ground that she had been misled by the example of her last mistress.

At the third attempt to provide herself with a servant, Iris was able to report the discovery of a responsible person who told the truth—an unmarried lady of middle age.

In this case, the young woman was described as a servant thoroughly trained in the

performance of her duties, honest, sober, industrious, of an even temper, and unprovided with 'a follower' in the shape of a sweetheart. Even her name sounded favourably in the ear of a stranger—it was Fanny Mere. Iris asked how a servant, apparently possessed of a faultless character, came to be in want of a situation. At this question the lady sighed, and acknowledged that she had 'made a dreadful discovery,' relating to the past life of her maid. It proved to be the old, the miserably old, story of a broken promise of marriage, and of the penalty paid as usual by the unhappy woman. 'I will say nothing of my own feelings,' the maiden lady explained. 'In justice to the other female servants, it was impossible for me to keep such a person in my house; and, in justice to you, I must most unwillingly stand in the way of Fanny Mere's prospects by mentioning my reason for parting with her.'

'If I could see the young woman and speak to her,' Iris said, 'I should like to decide the question of engaging her, for myself.'

The lady knew the address of her discharged servant, and—with some appearance of wonder—communicated it. Miss Henley wrote at once, telling Fanny Mere to come to her on the following day.

When she woke on the next morning, later than usual, an event occurred which Iris had been impatiently expecting for some time past. She found a letter waiting on her bedside table, side by side with her cup of tea. Lord Harry had written to her at last.

Whether he used his pen or his tongue, the Irish lord's conduct was always more or less in need of an apology. Here were the guilty one's new excuses, expressed in his customary medley of frank confession and flowery language:

'I am fearing, my angel, that I have

offended you. You have too surely said to yourself, This miserable Harry might have made me happy by writing two lines—and what does he do? He sends a message in words which tell me nothing.

'My sweet girl, the reason why is that I was in two minds, when your man stopped me on my way to the ship.

'Whether it was best for you—I was not thinking of myself—to confess the plain truth, or to take refuge in affectionate equivocation, was more than I could decide at the time. When minutes are enough for your intelligence, my stupidity wants days. Well! I saw it at last. A man owes the truth to a true woman; and you are a true woman. There you find a process of reasoning—I have been five days getting hold of it.

'But tell me one thing first. Brutus killed a man; Charlotte Corday killed a man. One of the two victims was a fine tyrant, and

the other a mean tyrant. Nobody blames those two historical assassins. Why then blame me for wishing to make a third? Is a mere modern murderer beneath my vengeance, by comparison with two classical tyrants who did *their* murders by deputy? The man who killed Arthur Mountjoy is (next to Cain alone) the most atrocious homicide that ever trod the miry ways of this earth. There is my reply! I call it a crusher.

'So now my mind is easy. Darling, let me make your mind easy next.

'When I left you at the window of Vimpany's house, I was off to the other railroad to find the murderer in his hiding-place by the seaside. He had left it; but I got a trace, and went back to London—to the Docks. Some villain in Ireland, who knows my purpose, must have turned traitor. Anyhow, the wretch has escaped me.

'Yes; I searched the ship in every corner

He was not on board. Has he gone on befor me, by an earlier vessel? Or has he directe his flight to some other part of the world? shall find out in time. His day of reckonin will come, and he, too, shall know a violen death! Amen. So be it. Amen.

'Have I done now? Bear with me, gentl Iris—there is a word more to come.

'You will wonder why I went on by th steam-ship—all the way to South Africa— when I failed to find the man I wanted, o board. What was my motive? You, yo alone, are always my motive. Lucky me have found gold, lucky men have foun diamonds. Why should I not be one c them? My sweet, let us suppose two possibl things; my own elastic convictions would ca them two likely things, but never mind tha Say, I come back a reformed character; ther is your only objection to me, at once removed And take it for granted that I return with

fortune of my own finding. In that case, what becomes of Mr. Henley's objection to me? It melts (as Shakespeare says somewhere) into thin air. Now do take my advice, for once. Show this part of my letter to your excellent father, with my love. I answer beforehand for the consequences. Be happy, my Lady Harry—as happy as I am—and look for my return on an earlier day than you may anticipate.—Yours till death, and after,

'HARRY.'

Like the Irish lord, Miss Henley was 'in two minds,' while she rose and dressed herself. There were parts of the letter for which she loved the writer, and parts of it for which she hated him.

What a prospect was before that reckless man—what misery, what horror, might not be lying in wait in the dreadful future! If

he failed in the act of vengeance, that violent death of which he had written so heedlessly might overtake him from another hand. If he succeeded, the law might discover his crime, and the infamy of expiation on the scaffold might be his dreadful end. She turned, shuddering, from the contemplation of those hideous possibilities, and took refuge in the hope of his safe, his guiltless return. Even if his visions of success, even if his purposes of reform (how hopeless at his age!) were actually realised, could she consent to marry the man who had led his life, had written his letter, had contemplated (and still cherished) his merciless resolution of revenge? No woman in her senses could let the bare idea of being his wife enter her mind. Iris opened her writing-desk, to hide the letter from all eyes but her own. As she secured it with the key, her heart sank under the return of a terror remembered but too well. Once more

the superstitious belief in a destiny that was urging Lord Harry and herself nearer and nearer to each other, even when they seemed to be most widely and most surely separated, thrilled her under the chilling mystery of its presence. She dropped helplessly into a chair. Oh, for a friend who could feel for her, who could strengthen her, whose wise words could restore her to her better and calmer self! Hugh was far away; and Iris was left to suffer and to struggle alone.

Heartfelt aspirations for help and sympathy! Oh, irony of circumstances, how were they answered? The housemaid entered the room, to announce the arrival of a discharged servant, with a lost character.

'Let the young woman come in,' Iris said. Was Fanny Mere the friend whom she had been longing for? She looked at her troubled face in the glass—and laughed bitterly.

CHAPTER XIV

THE LADY'S MAID

IT was not easy to form a positive opinion of the young woman who now presented herself in Miss Henley's room.

If the Turkish taste is truly reported as valuing beauty in the female figure more than beauty in

the female face, Fanny Mere's personal appearance might have found, in Constantinople, the approval which she failed to receive in London. Slim and well-balanced, firmly and neatly made, she interested men who met with her by accident (and sometimes even women), if they happened to be walking behind her. When they quickened their steps and, passing on, looked back at her face, they lost all interest in Fanny from that moment. Painters would have described the defect in her face as 'want of colour.' She was one of the whitest of fair female human beings. Light flaxen hair, faint blue eyes with no expression in them, and a complexion which looked as if it had never been stirred by a circulation of blood, produced an effect on her fellow-creatures in general which made them insensible to the beauty of her figure, and the grace of her movements. There was no betrayal of bad health in her strange pallor: on

the contrary, she suggested the idea of rare physical strength. Her quietly respectful manner was, so to say, emphasised by an underlying self-possession, which looked capable of acting promptly and fearlessly in the critical emergencies of life. Otherwise, the expression of character in her face was essentially passive. Here was a steady, resolute young woman, possessed of qualities which failed to show themselves on the surface —whether good qualities or bad qualities experience alone could determine.

Finding it impossible, judging by a first impression, to arrive at any immediate decision favourable or adverse to the stranger, Iris opened the interview with her customary frankness; leaving the consequences to follow as they might.

'Take a seat, Fanny,' she said, 'and let us try if we can understand each other. I think you will agree with me that there must be no

concealments between us. You ought to know that your mistress has told me why she parted with you. It was her duty to tell me the truth, and it is my duty not to be unjustly prejudiced against you after what I have heard. Pray believe me when I say that I don't know, and don't wish to know, what your temptation may have been——'

'I beg your pardon, Miss, for interrupting you. My temptation was vanity.'

Whether she did or did not suffer in making that confession, it was impossible to discover. Her tones were quiet; her manner was unobtrusively respectful; the pallor of her face was not disturbed by the slightest change of colour. Was the new maid an insensible person? Iris began to fear already that she might have made a mistake.

'I don't expect you to enter into particulars,' she said; 'I don't ask you here to humiliate yourself.'

'When I got your letter, Miss, I tried to consider how I might show myself worthy of your kindness,' Fanny answered. 'The one way I could see was not to let you think better of me than I deserve. When a person, like me, is told, for the first time, that her figure makes amends for her face, she is flattered by the only compliment that has been paid to her in all her life. My excuse, Miss (if I have an excuse) is a mean one—I couldn't resist a compliment. That is all I have to say.'

Iris began to alter her opinion. This was not a young woman of the ordinary type. It began to look possible, and more than possible, that she was worthy of a helping hand. The truth seemed to be in her.

'I understand you, and feel for you.' Having replied in those words, Iris wisely and delicately changed the subject. 'Let me hear how you are situated at the present time,' she continued. 'Are your parents living?'

'My father and mother are dead, Miss.'

'Have you any other relatives?'

'They are too poor to be able to do anything for me. I have lost my character—and I am left to help myself.'

'Suppose you fail to find another situation?' Iris suggested.

'Yes, Miss?'

'How can you help yourself?'

'I can do what other girls have done.'

'What do you mean?'

'Some of us starve on needlework. Some take to the streets. Some end it in the river. If there is no other chance for me, I think I shall try that way,' said the poor creature, as quietly as if she was speaking of some customary prospect that was open to her. 'There will be nobody to be sorry for me——and, as I have read, drowning is not a very painful death.'

'You shock me, Fanny! I, for one, should be sorry for you.'

'Thank you, Miss.'

'And try to remember,' Iris continued, 'that there may be chances in the future which you don't see yet. You speak of what you have read, and I have already noticed how clearly and correctly you express yourself. You must have been educated. Was it at home? or at school?'

'I was once sent to school,' Fanny replied, not quite willingly.

'Was it a private school?'

'Yes.'

That short answer warned Iris to be careful.

'Recollections of school,' she said good-humouredly, 'are not the pleasantest recollections in some of our lives. Perhaps I have touched on a subject which is disagreeable to you?'

'You have touched on one of my disappointments, Miss. While my mother lived,

she was my teacher. After her death, my father sent me to school. When he failed in business, I was obliged to leave, just as I had begun to learn and like it. Besides, the girls found out that I was going away, because there was no money at home to pay the fees —and that mortified me. There is more that I might tell you. I have a reason for hating my recollections of the school—but I mustn't mention that time in my life which your goodness to me tries to forget.'

All that appealed to her, so simply and so modestly, in that reply, was not lost on Iris. After an interval of silence, she said:

'Can you guess what I am thinking of, Fanny?'

'No, Miss.'

'I am asking myself a question. If I try you in my service shall I never regret it?'

For the first time, strong emotion shook Fanny Mere. Her voice failed her, in the

effort to speak. Iris considerately went on.

'You will take the place,' she said, 'of a maid who has been with me for years—a good dear creature who has only left me through ill-health. I must not expect too much of you. I cannot hope that you will be to me what Rhoda Bennet has been.'

Fanny succeeded in controlling herself. 'Is there any hope, she asked,' 'of my seeing Rhoda Bennet?'

'Why do you wish to see her?'

'You are fond of her, Miss—that is one reason.'

'And the other?'

'Rhoda Bennet might help me to serve you as I want to serve you; she might perhaps encourage me to try if I could follow her example.' Fanny paused, and clasped her hands fervently. The thought that was in her forced its way to expression. 'It's so

easy to feel grateful,' she said—'and, oh, so hard to show it!'

'Come to me,' her new mistress answered, 'and show it to-morrow.'

Moved by that compassionate impulse, Iris said the words which restored to an unfortunate creature a lost character and a forfeited place in the world.

CHAPTER XV

MR. HENLEY'S TEMPER

PROVIDED by Nature with ironclad constitutional defences against illness, Mr. Henley was now and then troubled with groundless doubts of his own state of health. Acting under a delusion of this kind, he imagined symptoms which rendered a change of residence necessary from his town house to his country house, a few days only after his daughter had decided on the engagement of her new maid.

Iris gladly, even eagerly, adapted her own wishes to the furtherance of her father's plans. Sorely tried by anxiety and suspense, she needed all that rest and tranquillity could do

for her. The first week in the country produced an improvement in her health. Enjoying the serene beauty of woodland and field, breathing the delicious purity of the air —sometimes cultivating her own corner in the garden, and sometimes helping the women in the lighter labours of the dairy —her nerves recovered their tone, and her spirits rose again to their higher level.

In the performance of her duties the new maid justified Miss Henley's confidence in her, during the residence of the household in the country.

She showed, in her own undemonstrative way, a grateful sense of her mistress's kindness. Her various occupations were intelligently and attentively pursued; her even temper never seemed to vary; she gave the servants no opportunities of complaining of her. But one peculiarity in her behaviour excited hostile remark, below-stairs. On the occasions

when she was free to go out for the day, she always found some excuse for not joining any of the other female servants, who might happen to be similarly favoured. The one use she made of her holiday was to travel by railway to some place unknown; always returning at the right time in the evening. Iris knew enough of the sad circumstances to be able to respect her motives, and to appreciate the necessity for keeping the object of those solitary journeys a secret from her fellow-servants.

The pleasant life in the country house had lasted for nearly a month, when the announcement of Hugh's approaching return to England reached Iris. The fatal end of his father's long and lingering illness had arrived, and the funeral had taken place. Business, connected with his succession to the property, would detain him in London for a few days. Submitting to this necessity, he earnestly

expressed the hope of seeing Iris again, the moment he was at liberty.

Hearing the good news, Mr. Henley obstinately returned to his plans—already twice thwarted—for promoting the marriage of Mountjoy and Iris.

He wrote to invite Hugh to his house in a tone of cordiality which astonished his daughter; and when the guest arrived, the genial welcome of the host had but one defect—Mr. Henley overacted his part. He gave the two young people perpetual opportunities of speaking to each other privately; and, on the principle that none are so blind as those who won't see, he failed to discover that the relations between them continued to be relations of friendship, do what he might. Hugh's long attendance on his dying father had left him depressed in spirits; Iris understood him, and felt for him. He was not

ready with his opinion of the new maid, after he had seen Fanny Mere. 'My inclination,' he said, 'is to trust the girl. And yet I hesitate to follow my inclination—and I don't know why.'

When Hugh's visit came to an end, he continued his journey in a northerly direction. The property left to him by his father included a cottage, standing in its own grounds, on the Scotch shore of the Solway Firth. The place had been neglected during the long residence of the elder Mr. Mountjoy on the Continent. Hugh's present object was to judge, by his own investigation, of the necessity for repairs.

On the departure of his guest, Mr. Henley (still obstinately hopeful of the marriage on which he had set his mind) assumed a jocular manner towards Iris, and asked if the Scotch cottage was to be put in order for the honeymoon. Her reply, gently as it was expressed, threw him into a state of fury. His vindictive

temper revelled, not only in harsh words, but in spiteful actions. He sold one of his dogs which had specially attached itself to Iris; and, seeing that she still enjoyed the country, he decided on returning to London.

She submitted in silence. But the events of that past time, when her father's merciless conduct had driven her out of his house, returned ominously to her memory. She said to herself: 'Is a day coming when I shall leave him again?' It was coming—and she little knew how.

CHAPTER XVI

THE DOCTOR IN FULL DRESS

MR. HENLEY'S household had been again established in London, when a servant appeared one morning with a visiting card, and announced that a gentleman had called who wished to see Miss Henley. She looked at the card. The gentleman was Mr. Vimpany.

On the point of directing the man to say that she was engaged, Iris checked herself.

Mrs. Vimpany's farewell words had produced a strong impression on her. There had been moments of doubt and gloom in her later life when the remembrance of that unhappy woman was associated with a feeling (perhaps

a morbid feeling) of self-reproach. It seemed to be hard on the poor penitent wretch not to have written to her. Was she still leading the same dreary life in the mouldering old town? Or had she made another attempt to return to the ungrateful stage? The gross husband, impudently presenting himself with his card and his message, could answer those questions if he could do nothing else. For that reason only, Iris decided that she would receive Mr. Vimpany.

On entering the room, she found two discoveries awaiting her, for which she was entirely unprepared.

The doctor's personal appearance exhibited a striking change; he was dressed, in accordance with the strictest notions of professional propriety, entirely in black. More remarkable still, there happened to be a French novel among the books on the table—and that novel, Mr. Vimpany, barbarous Mr. Vimpany,

was actually reading with an appearance of understanding it!

'I seem to surprise you,' said the doctor. 'Is it this?' He held up the French novel as he put the question.

'I must own that I was not aware of the range of your accomplishments,' Iris answered.

'Oh, don't talk of accomplishments! I learnt my profession in Paris. For nigh on three years I lived among the French medical students. Noticing this book on the table, I thought I would try whether I had forgotten the language—in the time that has passed (you know) since those days. Well, my memory isn't a good one in most things, but, strange to say (force of habit, I suppose), some of my French sticks by me still. I hope I see you well, Miss Henley. Might I ask if you noticed the new address, when I sent up my card?'

'I only noticed your name.'

The doctor produced his pocket-book, and took out a second card. With pride he pointed to the address: '5 Redburn Road, Hampstead Heath.' With pride he looked at his black clothes. 'Strictly professional, isn't it?' he said. 'I have bought a new practice; and I have become a new man. It isn't easy at first. No, by Jingo—I beg your pardon—I was about to say, my own respectability rather bothers me; I shall get used to it in time. If you will allow me I'll take a liberty. No offence, I hope?'

He produced a handful of his cards, and laid them out in a neat little semicircle on the table.

'A word of recommendation, when you have the chance, would be a friendly act on your part,' he explained. 'Capital air in Redburn Road, and a fine view of the Heath out of the garret windows—but it's rather an out-

of-the-way situation. Not that I complain; beggars mustn't be choosers. I should have preferred a practice in a fashionable part of London; but our little windfall of money——'

He came to a full stop in the middle of a sentence. The sale of the superb diamond pin, by means of which Lord Harry had repaid Mrs. Vimpany's services, was, of all domestic events, the last which it might be wise to mention in the presence of Miss Henley. He was awkwardly silent. Taking advantage of that circumstance, Iris introduced the subject in which she felt interested.

'How is Mrs. Vimpany?' she asked.

'Oh, she's all right!'

'Does she like your new house?'

The doctor made a strange reply. 'I really can't tell you,' he said.

'Do you mean that Mrs. Vimpany declines to express an opinion?'

He laughed. 'In all my experience,' he said, 'I never met with a woman who did that! No, no; the fact is, my wife and I have parted company. There's no need to look so serious about it! Incompatibility of temper, as the saying is, has led us to a friendly separation. Equally a relief on both sides. She goes her way, and I go mine.'

His tone disgusted Iris—and she let him see it. 'Is it of any use to ask you for Mrs. Vimpany's address?' she inquired.

His atrocious good-humour kept its balance as steadily as ever: 'Sorry to disappoint you. Mrs. Vimpany hasn't given me her address. Curious, isn't it? The fact is, she moped a good deal, after you left us; talked of her duty, and the care of her soul, and that sort of thing. When I hear where she is, I'll let you know with pleasure. To the best of my belief, she's doing nurse's work somewhere.'

'Nurse's work! What do you mean?'

'Oh, the right thing—all in the fashion. She belongs to what they call a Sisterhood; goes about, you know, in a shabby black gown, with a poke bonnet. At least, so Lord Harry told me the other day.'

In spite of herself, Iris betrayed the agitation which those words instantly roused in her. 'Lord Harry!' she exclaimed. 'Where is he? In London?'

'Yes—at Parker's Hotel.'

'When did he return?'

'Oh, a few days ago; and—what do you think?—he's come back from the gold-fields a lucky man. Damn it, I've let the cat out of the bag! I was to keep the thing a secret from everybody, and from you most particularly. He's got some surprise in store for you. Don't tell him what I've done! We had a little misunderstanding, in past days, at Honeybuzzard—and, now we are friends

again, I don't want to lose his lordship's interest.'

Iris promised to be silent. But to know that the wild lord was in England again, and to remain in ignorance whether he had, or had not, returned with the stain of bloodshed on him, was more than she could endure.

'There is one question I must ask you,' she said. 'I have reason to fear that Lord Harry left this country, with a purpose of revenge——'

Mr. Vimpany wanted no further explanation. 'Yes, yes; I know. You may be easy about that. There's been no mischief done, either one way or the other. The man he was after, when he landed in South Africa (he told me so himself), has escaped him.'

With that reply, the doctor got up in a hurry to bring his visit to an end. He proposed to take to flight, he remarked facetiously, before Miss Henley wheedled him into saying anything more.

After opening the door, however, he suddenly returned to Iris, and added a last word in the strictest confidence.

'If you won't forget to recommend me to your friends,' he said, 'I'll trust you with another secret. You will see his lordship in a day or two, when he returns from the races. Good-bye.'

The races! What was Lord Harry doing at the races?

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME

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